

**THE BOOK WAS  
DRENCHED**

UNIVERSAL  
LIBRARY

**OU\_168529**

UNIVERSAL  
LIBRARY



OSMANIA UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Call No. **808.2/328H** Accession No. **24369**

Author **Barry, P. S.**

Title **How to - - - playwright**

This book should be returned on or before the date last marked below.





**HOW TO SUCCEED  
AS A PLAYWRIGHT**

*Works by the same Author*

HOW TO SUCCEED AS A WRITER. 2/6 net

THE SECRET POWER (How to Win and Keep it).  
1/6 net. (Mind and Body Handbook, No. 16)

TWELVE MONSTROUS CRIMINALS. 18/- net. (From  
Nero to Rasputin)

# How to Succeed as a Playwright

by

**PHILIP BEAUFOY BARRY**

Late Member of the "old Vic" Shakespeare Co., Mrs. Edward Compton's  
Comedy Co., The Dundee Repertory Co., The Brighton Repertory Co.,  
The Plymouth (1912) Repertory Co., etc. etc.

"ART IS NATURE'S RIVAL"

HUTCHINSON & CO. (Publishers) LTD.  
34-36 Paternoster Row, LONDON, E.C.4

TO MY FRIEND  
WILFORD M. FIELD

*Made and Printed in Great Britain at*  
The Gainsborough Press, St. Albans. Fisher, Knight & Co., Ltd,

## CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION - - - - -	II
<b>CHAPTER</b>	
I. PLAY CONSTRUCTION - - - - -	15
II. CURIOSITY, SUSPENSE, MOVEMENT, AND CLIMAX - - - - -	25
III SOME HINTS ON DIALOGUE - - - - -	37
IV. ENTRANCES AND EXITS - - - - -	47
V. "SCENIC ARRANGEMENTS" - - - - -	55
VI. THE "CROOK" PLAY - - - - -	61
VII. THE FARCICAL COMEDY - - - - -	72
VIII. THE "STRAIGHT" COMEDY - - - - -	79
IX. MUSICAL COMEDY AND REVUE LIBRETTO - - - - -	89
X. THE ONE-ACT PLAY AND SKETCH - - - - -	98
XI. THE PLAY WITH A SERIOUS INTEREST - - - - -	104
XII. THE ROMANTIC OR "COSTUME" DRAMA AND THE ADAPTED PLAY - - - - -	114
XIII. RADIO DRAMA - - - - -	124
XIV. CHARACTER-NAMING AND METHODS OF WORK - - - - -	130
XV. SUBJECTS TO BE AVOIDED AND THE PLAY- WRIGHT'S IDEALS - - - - -	135
XVI. HOW TO MARKET A PLAY - - - - -	143
XVII. THE L.S.D. OF PLAY-WRITING—AND A LAST LOOK ROUND - - - - -	150
APPENDIX - - - - -	159



## INTRODUCTION

PLAYWRITING is perhaps in some respects more of an artifice than an art. Whilst the actual technicalities of the work are frequently more intricate and more rigid than the technicalities of novel-writing, the actual artistry involved is probably (except in isolated cases) on an easier and more democratic level.

One imagines that practically every person who possesses the dramatic sense carries in his brain the possibilities of at least one good and convincing play. Some cherished aspect of life—some vital episode within his own experience, may form the nucleus. Given that basis, he may accomplish much by watching the plays of other writers, by daily observation of men and women, and by the study of works that present to him the technicalities and intimacies of the playwright's craft.

In too many cases, however, the idea, the vivid experience, remains undeveloped, because the embryo dramatist does not possess the technical knowledge to clothe and body forth the shadow-creatures of his brain.



## Introduction

In a recent magazine-article, Mr. Seymour Hicks (himself a dramatist and a very sound authority) related that after reading the many hundreds of plays annually submitted to him he rarely found one that would meet actual stage requirements. In many cases the works contained good plots, brilliant fancy, admirable characterization. But these qualities were rarely combined; and in those cases where such combinations *did* happen, then the technical flaws entirely ruined the chances of acceptance. Many of the plays were far too short for representation as a full-night entertainment; many, on the other hand, were absurdly long and would have needed at least two evenings for their performance. Mr. Hicks conveyed the suggestion that *ignorance of stage requirements* rather than want of inventive ability was the chief weakness that he encountered when reading the works of untried dramatists.

It must be a matter for regret that so many potential playwrights are thus marred in the making—that their efforts must remain on the shelf. The writer presents to embryo authors the hints and suggestions embodied in this little volume, hoping and believing that a study of them will enable those young writers to put forth their work in good acceptable form, ready for stage-production, providing, of course, that the general scheme is on the right basis.

The writer has had the advantage of a first-hand experience of plays that can perhaps only be

## Introduction

achieved by taking part in their representation. A twenty years' sojourn on the stage, during which time he has played every conceivable kind of part from Shakespearean repertory to *révue*, and from Pinero to pantomime, has enabled him to recognize to some extent the things that go to the making and the sustaining of a workman-like and successful play. And, among those actor-dramatists who have achieved distinction, let us record the names of Arthur Pinero, Stephen Phillips, A. E. W. Mason, Sutton Vane, and Noel Coward. The name of William Shakespeare need not be emphasized.

The writer has attempted to deal with practically every class of play in these pages. Whilst no man (not even the wisest theatrical manager or critic) can say : " This play will succeed ! " or " This play will fail ! ", nevertheless there are certain broad lines upon which a dramatic venture may travel with every possibility of triumph. Those lines are briefly (but one hopes adequately) indicated in the pages that follow.

PHILIP BEAUFOY BARRY

*London, January, 1928.*



# HOW TO SUCCEED AS A PLAYWRIGHT

## CHAPTER I

### PLAY CONSTRUCTION

IT may be said at once in regard to plays not only in English-speaking countries but throughout the world, that we are living in an age of transition. We stand at a point where certain new and vital forms of expression are being bravely and conscientiously put forward by a band of authors who have long since realized that tradition alone can never serve to keep an art impact of life.

Many years ago, Ibsen, Bjornsen, Suderman, Brieux, Maeterlinck, Bernard Shaw, and several other men of genius, came to the conclusion that the drama after a painful evolution from the dim times of mystery and miracle-plays had assumed certain shackles which held it in so rigid a grip that human life appeared to have left it for ever. Pioneers all of them, they set out to break a tradition—to thrust aside the machine-made plots

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

—to bring the colour, warmth, and poignancy of reality into the traffic of the stage.

To-day we have gone a step further. In painting, in sculpture, in poetry, there has been a revolutionary movement. The drama, likewise, has been subjected to some extent to this movement. The plays of Pirandello, of the Brothers Kapek, and a small band of imaginative pioneers in Europe and America, have presented a new form—a new method of expression.

However, this chapter does not propose to deal with revolutionary or other movements. The preceding words are justified, however, because they bring us to the point which the writer desires to make. The point is this—that no matter how the method of presentation may vary with the changing periods, one fact remains steadfast and unshaken. Unless a play have a solid foundation—in other words, unless its construction be sound and convincing—it will fail in its objective and find its way to the rubbish-heap.

If a builder set out to construct a house, he thinks first of all of the foundation. He may erect a gorgeous fabric; he may decorate the walls and the ceilings; he may evolve a very beautiful thing. But if he neglect his foundation—if it be rotten and worthless—then, perhaps, the building crumbles before the house receives its first tenant! Equally, a play may be impact of clever characterization—of interesting episodes—of brilliant dialogue, but if the preliminary

## Play Construction

construction be feeble and futile, then the work may fail before the first audience has sat through the performance!

Pirandello, the Kapek Brothers, and all the other pioneers of the new drama are masters of construction. Their methods may be bizarre, their presentation may be intelligible to some and hazy to others, but the actual foundation of their fabrics is unimpeachable. Let the embryo playwright remember this fact and not jump to the conclusion that because a certain form of play is apparently set free from the old-time conventions and restrictions, it is a loose and unwieldy affair.

The first requirement in the construction of a play is an intriguing and above all, a convincing plot. Striking originality is not necessarily an essential. Indeed, it may be said unhesitatingly that the plays which have achieved the greatest success, not only in our own period but in former ages, have been plays that have owed their triumph to novelty of treatment rather than to originality of plot.

Let us take a few outstanding examples in different genres.

In the realm of tragedy we have "Hamlet." Could anything be more hackneyed than the plot of a man obsessed by a desire for vengeance on another man who has wrought him an injury? The plot of "Hamlet" might easily have been conceived by a schoolboy of sixteen—it is the

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

treatment, the philosophy, the knowledge of life, the poetry, that have set it in the ranks of the immortals.

Let us now take a leap to a play which has perhaps been played more often than "Hamlet"—a play of another time, another mould, another plane of distinction. All of us who are sophisticated smile at "East Lynne," but it is one of the outstanding successes of the last century. Let us consider the plot :

A young wife, believing that her husband is unfaithful, elopes with another man. Deserted by her lover, she returns to her home where she is not recognized, for they believe that she has died, and her appearance is altered by grief and age. She tends her own child who eventually dies in his arms. At the finish, as she herself lies dying, her husband learns the truth, and the play ends with a message of hope and of forgiveness.

Just the A.B.C. of a plot, this—the sort of plot that has formed the basis of a thousand penny novelettes, but even to-day there are many audiences who will sit for three hours and listen to the well-worn sorrows of "Lady Isabel" and "Archibald Carlyle."

Our third example shall be a farcical comedy. Most of us have heard of "Charley's Aunt"—many of us have seen that admirable piece of fooling. This farce has been played in every section of the world for more than thirty years—it has been translated into various foreign

## Play Construction

languages. It has probably earned more money in fees than a dozen successful plays of a startlingly original plot. Now what is the plot in a nutshell?

Just this! /An irresponsible young undergraduate for certain purposes of the play assumes the dress, voice and guise of a ringletted old lady of the early Victorian type. Later, the genuine "aunt" appears, and many complications follow. The audience roars from beginning to end.

Now long before Brandon Thomas wrote this classic of farcedom, dramatists in all countries had employed the central notion of a man masquerading as a woman for comic purposes. But Thomas was ingenious enough to treat his subject in a novel and exhilarating fashion. He recognized that treatment rather than striking novelty of plot is the real end of the successful author.

We have elaborated this point because one meets so many embryo playwrights who confess with despair that they dare not put pen to paper because they cannot hit upon anything entirely new in the direction of plots. Let these lines comfort those feeble souls, for, indeed, there is no necessity for them to wait for the startling inspiration. /Plots lie awaiting them in the daily newspapers, in their own homes, and in the restaurants where they lunch and dine. Let them keep their eyes open, and endeavour always to see drama or comedy, or both, in every episode that enters their path.!



## How to Succeed as a Playwright

It is difficult to dogmatize on the subject of the plot-synopsis and its length, because each author may have his own method of expressing his views. The writer would suggest, however, that the first synopsis should never be too long—should never, if possible, exceed 1,500 words. For if it be too long-winded, the author may find himself confused. Moreover, if he invent too many small episodes in his preliminary outline, he will probably be hidebound by those episodes throughout the work. Now the whole essence of an artistic and sound artistic creation is that it develops as it grows. That is to say, in the very act of writing, the playwright will find new incidents occur to him, and those incidents will perhaps be far, far more *natural*—more convincing—than incidents foreshadowed in cold blood in the preliminary synopsis. Here, then, is a good general rule for the construction of a play, a rule which, of course, has several exceptions. / *Confine your first synopsis to 1,000 or 1,500 words, setting down the main episodes only and leaving the smaller incidents to develop en route.* /

The synopsis having been written and carefully considered with a view to detecting and removing any weaknesses or defects, the next action is to divide the play into Acts and Scenes

Nowadays, five-act and four-act plays are to some extent out of fashion. They entail too many waits between the acts, and the audience,

## Play Construction

accustomed to the continuous performance of the cinema, rather resents the break in the continuity. The day may arrive when some skilful dramatist will evolve the two-act play, which form of presentation at present is confined to musical comedies and operettas. The most acceptable piece to-day (1928) is the three-act entertainment.

[The number of scenes should also be kept down as much as possible.] Any process that entails "waits" is to be deprecated, for owing to the lateness of the dinner-hour few performances begin before 8.30; and with only two-and-a-half hours in which to present the piece, the management do not welcome any kind of play that involves a huge number of scenic changes. To this rule there are, naturally, exceptions, and the established dramatist may sometimes take liberties. The beginner who has to win his spurs will do well to study economy of time and money. | For not only does elaborate scenery involve an outlay for the actual scenic production, but it means that a larger stage-staff has to be nightly in the theatre.

These points may seem trivial and even sordid, but the theatre is a commercial affair, and the man who desires to enter that region as a writer of plays will have quite enough difficulties to encounter without adding to them by involving his work in a series of economic objections. | There is no necessity, of course, to rush to the opposite extreme and to contrive the play merely with a view to a minimum of expenditure, but if this end

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

can be achieved without detriment to the work, then it is certainly all to the good.

\ It may be said at once that the ideal play from the viewpoint of the management is probably the piece wherein *one "set" or scene stands throughout*. | If the beginner can work on these lines, he should certainly do so. It may be said without hesitation that a fairly brilliant play involving only one "set" and a small Company will stand a better chance of acceptance by the average management than a more brilliant piece of work entailing a dozen elaborate scenes and a huge set of artistes. In both cases a risk is taken, but whilst in the event of success the receipts are equal in both cases, in the event of failure the smaller loss is naturally preferred to the larger loss.

| Now, having arranged what Americans call the "lay-out" of the play, the next action of the author should lie in the direction of his character-plot. \ He must try and visualize to the life each of his puppets, and, moreover, must take care that they are *not* puppets. | Let him put out of his mind the stock figures of the theatre which he has seen over and over again ; let him forget the lawyer with his bag and his conventional platitudes ; the "heavy" father with his boring orations to his daughter ; and all the other of the worn-out " clichés " that old-time dramatists loved to exhibit. Let him go to life for his models, and let him undertake no character that he does not seem to *know* exactly as if he had met that

## Play Construction

person. It is quite possible that he will not have had such an encounter, but he must visualize the character with such intentness that the friendship seems more actual than imaginary.

Over and over again a play with an ingenious plot and intriguing incidents has been spoiled by the introduction of stock-pot characters. The critics on the morning after the production cynically refer to "Old friends." "Our old friend, the sentimental burglar. . . ." "Our loyal acquaintance, the faithful family servant . . ." and so on. The public grins ; and having grinned, refrains from booking seats, or even going to the pit and gallery ! The play is withdrawn in a week or a fortnight !

This point must be emphasized, because the writer has learned by experience that beginners are very prone to introduce characters that are never met outside the pages of old plays.

It is a good plan sometimes to describe each character as it makes an entrance. Here is an example of the way in which it may be done !

"JOHN SMITH enters. He is a fresh-coloured man of forty-five, tall, robust, with an aggressive manner and a loud self-assertive voice. He gives the impression that he is the kind of man who would bully an inferior and cringe to a superior."

That is all that is necessary. The type of man is so well known that there is no need to elaborate

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

the description. On the other hand, if the character is an unusual, fantastic sort of person, then the author might give a more detailed analysis. For instance :

“ JOHN WILKINSON enters. He is a small, blue-eyed man, with the look of a mystic and the timid manner of one who goes about the world apologizing for being alive. His voice is soft and dreamy—he is absent-minded, courteous, gentle. The actor must try and convey the impression that here is a man who is more spirit than body, but must be careful not to introduce any ‘ namby-pamby ’ mannerism. He is no charlatan, but a man who believes every word he utters, although his way of uttering it is by no means convincing.”

These two specimens are crude enough, perhaps, but they will serve in a measure to indicate an excellent method of character presentation. Not only are the artistes engaged in the production aided by these suggestions, but the management in engaging the artistes have something by which *they* may be guided in their choice.

Having thus mapped out his synopsis of plot, his acts and scenes, and lastly his characters, the playwright may get to work on the actual composition. The chief constituents of dramatic media, viz., curiosity, suspense, movement, and climax, are described briefly in the subsequent chapter.

## CHAPTER II

### CURIOSITY, SUSPENSE, MOVEMENT, AND CLIMAX

ONE often encounters a brilliant and successful novelist who fails when he attempts to write a play. There is no need to refer to any specific examples. It would not be kind, nor would it serve a useful purpose. The fact may be accepted without question, for the records of the theatrical world in its association with novelists are open for all to read. What concerns us is merely this : Why does the writer of novels frequently do so badly when he desires to become a writer of plays ?

Because the medium of the novel and the medium of the play are not only entirely different, but are sometimes *diametrically opposed*. Let us take an example.

In a novel (or a short story), the author is, broadly speaking, working alone. In a play, he is working *in conjunction* with his audience. To some extent they are his silent collaborators.

Let us explain this a little. In a sensational novel a murder is committed. Not till the last chapter have we any notion who committed the crime. The whole essence of the story lies in the mystery, in the concealment of the identity of the culprit.

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

In the play, the reverse process occurs. The audience see the murder committed, and their interest is sustained throughout not by any curiosity as to the identity of the criminal, but by other developments. What will happen to him? What will happen to his associates, his wife, his sweetheart? and so on.

There is, of course, an exception to this rule, and that exception occurs in the entirely modern "crook" drama, to which a complete chapter will be devoted at a later stage. Here the authors (as a rule) adopt the method of the novelist and keep their secret to the finish. But the method is entirely contrary to all the accepted rules of dramatic composition. And even in "crook" plays this concealment process is not invariably followed. For instance, in "Raffles," which many persons regard as the finest example of this class of play, the audience knows almost from the outset that the famous "slow-bowler" varies his cricket by midnight expeditions of a decidedly unorthodox kind.

In concealing from the audience the truth concerning the principal character, authors of "crook" plays are perhaps doing an unwise thing. For, they simply set the audience a sort of guessing examination, and that kind of distraction does not make for the best sort of concentration. ✓

It may therefore be said that with a few exceptions (and they are illegitimate exceptions) the play and novel differ fundamentally on this matter

## Curiosity, Suspense, Movement, Climax

of concealment of the vital section of the plot. But there are other important divergences.

Let the embryo playwright remember that whereas the novelist can browse through 80,000 or 100,000 words at his leisure, the dramatist must for ever keep his mental eyes on the clock. He dare not let himself go as he pleases. He may have a favourite character whose acts and speech he would love to elaborate. But Time, which makes slaves of most of us, makes of the playwright a slave of slaves. He must say all that is required within a space of two-and-a-half hours, and sometimes in half-an-hour less !

Again, the novelist can make his own time-intervals without any kind of explanation. He can say casually : " A few hours later Jonathan was having an excited argument in the office with an irate employer. . . ." But the dramatist cannot be continually dropping the curtain to show a passage of time. There must be a continuity and a consistency about his time-table that at moments is very, very difficult to sustain. " Jonathan " has to keep moving, and if he retire to his office, the office must be exhibited on the stage if any essential action is to happen there. Action merely *referred to* counts for little in a play, though it carries conviction in a story. This statement, of course, does not include action supposed to be *seen* by a character during the progress of the piece. Thus a good actor describing a race " off-stage "



## How to Succeed as a Playwright

might carry emphasis and even startling conviction.

It comes to this, then : that the playwright is fettered perhaps ten times more heavily than the writer of stories. He has to resort to many artifices to break those chains. Unless the escape is cleverly done, he will rarely make a success.

Let us now consider the chief outstanding supports of a good play, whether it be tragedy, comedy or farce. They may be defined (very roughly) as :

CURIOSITY  
SUSPENSE

MOVEMENT  
CLIMAX

CURIOSITY. This is not the emotion in the bad sense, but rather an emotion of what may be called sympathetic interest. From the outset of the play the audience's curiosity in regard to the characters and their tendencies must be sharply roused and sustained to the finale of the work. Having seen a number of more or less intriguing personages appear on the stage, the audience must be impelled to ask itself what each one would do when crises and emergencies of the drama appear. Will " Henry " prove hero or coward? Will the wife stand by her husband or desert him at the crucial moment of temptation? Will a neurotic " Dope-fiend " reform or go down to lower depths when one action or the other may prove the turning-point in the play? And so on,

## Curiosity, Suspense, Movement, Climax

and so on, for unless the audience is curious concerning the behaviour of the characters, the mere introduction of exciting episodes may in all probability leave it cold and unconcerned.

In this connection, let it be pointed out most emphatically that action and behaviour should invariably develop naturally from the characters of the persons of the play. In melodrama of the old-fashioned type, the various "situations" and incidents were invented first of all and the characters were then added to fit in with those episodes. Mr. Vincent Crummles of sainted memory (manager of the Theatre Royal, Portsmouth, in the pages of "Nicholas Nickleby") once picked up a pump at a London sale. Immediately a thrilling drama was written "round" the pump, and every character had somehow to live up to it. That is melodrama in a nutshell, and Dickens satirized the absurdity for all time. If a play is to be vital and convincing, the characterization and the incidents must travel together with a natural and spontaneous mingling of events.

Once let the characterization be sound and honest, and the curiosity of the audience will be briskly roused. Their sympathy will follow, and the author will have passed a certain distance on the road towards the achievement of a successful effort.

SUSPENSE. The superficial student might

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

imagine that {the element of suspense enters only into tragedy or drama} As a matter of fact, it forms a more or less essential factor of all species of dramatic entertainment. For, after all, the sensation of suspense is merely the desire *in excelsis* to know what is "coming next." And unless that desire can be tickled and stimulated, there will be yawning in the audience, and probably a complete cessation of interest.

Let the embryo author accordingly strive his utmost to sustain this element of suspense, without straining it to any exaggerated extent. He must start at a low pressure (to use a symbol borrowed from steam) and gradually and cumulatively increase that pressure.

But the student may remark: "I went last night to a 'crook' play which has been running for a year and which is considered a first-class specimen of its kind. In that play a man is found murdered when the curtain rises. Surely, in this case, the author has started on a top-note—at his highest pressure. Why, then, do you tell us that we must avoid this tendency?"

Now, as a matter of fact, in a case of this kind, the dramatist has *not* begun on his highest note. In itself there is nothing very intriguing in a man being shot, stabbed or poisoned. One reads of such episodes weekly in the Press and hardly bestows a passing thought upon the paragraphs unless (and this is a most important "unless") the subsequent circumstances endow

## Curiosity, Suspense, Movement, Climax

the episode with an element of suspense. We may agree, therefore, that the mere fact of a man lying murdered on the stage at the opening of the play is a small happening compared with what should follow.

Now, having disposed of this possible criticism let us go on to point out that in order to *sustain* suspense each episode should, if possible, be more intriguing, more exciting than its predecessor. The author in mapping-out his incidents should carefully review them before embodying them in his play. He should weigh their comparative qualities of suspense.

A good plan for a beginner (and even for a practised dramatist) is to get hold of some sympathetic, intelligent friend, and rehearse to him the leading episodes of the proposed play. Let him watch that friend and see how he behaves. If at a certain point he begins to look at his watch, to play with his tiepin or to fidget with his feet, the chances are that that episode is not holding his interest. It would be well to reconsider carefully the episode in question, for were it introduced it is possible that at that point the interest of the audience would break down likewise.

MOVEMENT. A play must move—must move faster than a story. There is no time for intricate character development—the people must be born “grown-up,” if one may use this fantastic metaphor. Unless there is some excellent reason for

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

character-growth or transformation, it must rarely appear in a play. The audience must form a fairly accurate notion of the individuality of each character as it appears on the stage. The artistes will, of course, help to this end, but the playwright must do the larger part in forcing upon the audience a presentation of the personage he has in mind.

The chief essential of movement is conflict. Without conflict of some kind, intense or trivial, a play, like a story, will crawl, bare of life and energy. Let the young author in planning his play bear in mind that conflict must play its part from beginning to end. It is said that the nation is happy that has no history. This means, of course, that it has rarely encountered battle or conflict. That nation, whilst enviable enough, will never form the basis of a successful drama !

No ! Just as fighting is part of Nature's scheme of evolution, so must fighting, tragic, dramatic, humorous, grotesque—what you will—form the fundamental basis of the movement of a play. In Greek tragedy we have the conflict of man with the Gods, of man with Destiny. In the miracle and mystery-plays of the Middle Ages we have the contest of humanity with the Devil. In the Restoration drama, with its licentiousness and its frivolity, we have the conflict of love-traffickers set at variance with each other. In the old French farces, we have the battle of husband and lover. And to-day, in the fashionable " crook " drama,

## Curiosity, Suspense, Movement, Climax

we see invariably the hard conflict between the law and the breakers of the law.

This homily may appear like a digression, but it is nothing of the sort. The necessity of the element of conflict must be well "rubbed-in" to the embryo dramatist, because in too many cases he entirely overlooks this vital need. He works out a play wherein there is wit, humour, and observation, but of conflicting circumstances or conflicting temperaments there is nothing. The piece ambles on its way like a pleasant Sunday afternoon meeting. And that is just what it is, because everybody is kind, harmonious, and ready to agree with everybody else!

Let your play *move*! Keep it moving! And do not allow your action to finish until the last words of the piece are well in sight.

Avoid soliloquies. These are now entirely out of date, and perhaps it is well, for outpourings of the kind, whilst interesting enough from the point of view of the philosopher who loves introspection, hold up the movement of the performance. Directly a man begins to think he is *not* acting. And soliloquies, of course, as most people know, are merely supposed to be thoughts put into words for the benefit of the audience.

CLIMAX. We now come to the last of our four principal props of a good workmanlike play: we came to what is called "Climax."

Now, it may be said at once that whilst there

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

may be several climaxes in a play there should be only *one* fundamental climax. It is for the author to decide whether that shall arrive at the finale of his last act or at the finale of the act previous to the last.

Let us take the former method first.

By introducing a grand climax in the penultimate act, the author certainly provides an admirable situation that leaves the audience wondering how he is going to clear up matters in the last act. The danger, however, of this course, is that in too many cases the dramatist, having furnished this excellent situation, fails to explain it satisfactorily in the concluding act. The piece falls flat, and is probably a failure.

The better plan (in the writer's view) is to retain (if possible) the grand climacteric for the *last* act, so that the audience may be kept in a state of suspense until a few minutes before the fall of the curtain. If one glances at the records of plays that have made outstanding successes, we shall find that in at least seventy per cent. (or more) cases this course has been followed by the authors.

Perhaps the most deadly thing that can happen to a play is a weak last act. It has been said that that act is the rock on which hundreds of otherwise fine pieces have split. There is little doubt that the breakdown has been due to the author working-in his grand climax *too soon*. After that climax everything is a mere repetition, and a weariness of the audience's flesh!

## Curiosity, Suspense, Movement, Climax

Now here is a good general rule for the budding playwright :

*Make your Climaxes Cumulative.* Begin on a low note. Work up to the highest note and *finish* on that.

Let us add a word of warning ! The beginner may imagine that this insistence on climaxes signifies that there must be a number of melodramatic situations, following fast on one another. Nothing of the sort ! A play may contain no single episode of a really exciting character, and yet present a series of good and convincing climaxes. As a matter of fact, " situations " contrived simply for the sake of what used to be called an " effective curtain " should be rigidly avoided. They give an air of unreality to a play, and put the rest of the piece out of focus.

It is difficult, of course, for the writer of a book of this kind to dogmatize in detail concerning this matter of climax. Each author must feel for himself what is necessary, and must make his climaxes blend with the characters and with the general tendency of the play.

The beginner should study other peoples' plays. With the hints here given in his mind let him carefully read, or see performed, the works of such masters as Pinero, Henry Arthur Jones, Haddon Chambers, Bernard Shaw, Frederick Lonsdale, and half-a-dozen other men who know the technique of their business from A to Z. He



## How to Succeed as a Playwright

will find that although each of these authors may differ in style, imagination, viewpoint, and twenty other matters, they are all of them guided by certain definite rules in the matter of climax.

But here, perhaps, a word of warning is necessary. The young writer, intent on a final and tremendous climax, may build his entire play with a view to that consummation alone. Let him beware of this tendency. It is possibly one of the most dangerous temptations that beset all writers of fiction, whether story-writers or dramatists. Obsessed by this far-off and fascinating climax, the author neglects his foundations, his dialogue, and a dozen other vital things. In the result, the climax comes according to plan, but entirely fails to prove convincing or satisfactory.

A play, like any other creative piece of work, must be built up, section by section, without too much importance being attached by the author to any special episode or scene that happens to have fascinated himself. Otherwise, there is the possibility that there will be a lack of proportion. The audience may not be sufficiently acute to perceive what is wrong, but instinctively they will *feel* that a certain defect exists.

Curiosity, suspense, movement, and climax must all play their allotted parts, but a balance between these factors must be preserved, and the author must never for an instant lose sight of an harmonious and convincing "ensemble."

## CHAPTER III

### SOME HINTS ON DIALOGUE

THE chief essential for the dialogue of a play, as for a novel or short story, is that it shall be entirely natural without being commonplace. It is not always easy to achieve this end.

The tendency of the beginner is to be stilted and pedantic. If he is warned against this tendency then he may rush to the other extreme and indulge in petty vulgarities of speech and absurd trivialities. Between the Scylla of pedantry and the Charybdis of the suburban vernacular, he hovers anxiously. He tries both methods and finds both unsatisfactory.

"What on earth am I to do?" he asks piteously. "If I go in for what is called fine writing, then I am told that my characters are utterly untrue to life. If I try and reproduce talk exactly as I have heard it in bus, train, and restaurant, then some critic hisses in my ear that I am banal and commonplace."

Precisely! And both critics are right. For what the author must do is to endeavour to reproduce everyday conversation in such manner that *it shall not be* the language of the old-fashioned

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

novelette nor yet the language of the clerks playing dominoes in a City café.

But how is he to achieve this end?

That is where the gift of writing dialogue enters into the argument. Unless a man possess such gift he may put aside all thoughts of winning success as a playwright. For, whereas the novelist may sometimes (but not often) atone for a certain woodenness and dullness of dialogue by brilliant thinking and by the invention of amazing episodes, the dramatist has to rely upon the conversation of his characters to an inordinate degree. Once let the dialogue "drop down" and become stupid or commonplace, and the audience begins to cough, and very shortly to yawn!

We will assume accordingly that the young playwright who is reading these lines has a certain gift for the writing of dialogue. How is that gift to be trained and led into the right path?

First of all, by studying other dramatists. In making this suggestion the writer is well aware that he may be accused of encouraging plagiarism, apathy of imagination, and other sad things, but in reality he proposes nothing of the sort. Not for a moment does he suggest that the embryo dramatist should be a copyist, but there is no doubt that after a student has read, say, forty or fifty modern plays, he will begin to formulate for himself a certain knowledge of the scope and possibilities of good, forceful conversation. He will soon learn to discriminate between the sheep

## Some Hints On Dialogue

and the goats of the conversational pastures.

Secondly, the beginner should cultivate the study of every person with whom he comes in contact with a view to characteristic and picturesque speech. He should have his notebook ready, and jot down any amusing, striking, painful, mordant, sarcastic, kindly, brutal, stupid, wise, or ingenious remarks. One characteristic remark alone may serve for the building up of a striking and original character-study.

Let us take an illustration. It is not a very good one, but it will serve its purpose.

You happen to meet on a bus a young curate from the country, a timid, mild sort of person. You get into conversation with him and he mentions that owing to his ignorance of London restaurants he lunched that day at the British Museum Refreshment Room.

Now, this remark, commonplace apparently, at once suggests something of the curate's tendencies. He is of that timid order of clerical mankind that dare not trust itself amid the temptations and allurements of the ordinary restaurant. In the precincts of the Museum, he feels safe; and immediately you conjure up a picture of him munching a Bath bun and sipping a glass of milk in the shadow of respectability as symbolized by the great temple in Bloomsbury!

After that, you go on to build up his character, bit by bit. He develops all sorts of amusing little features that at first you would not have imagined.

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

In the result, he steps upon the stage of your imagination a clear-cut figure—a character impact of reality and of life.

Or at your Club or office you happen across a man who says quite casually when discussing feminine characteristics : “ I have cut out women entirely for the past ten years ! ” “ Cut out women ! ” The remark is brutal, characteristic. Immediately you fix upon this remark as the nucleus of a character. And so on ; using your daily experience as an academy of character-study.

Once get the character firmly, vividly fixed in your brain, once get it visualized, and the dialogue will, in all probability, flow naturally of its own volition. You will find your pen practically running away with itself ; you will find your characters saying all kinds of things that are appropriate, forceful, real. Of course, there will be times when your liver or your brain (or both) being sluggish and unresponsive, the characters will be silent, will refuse to say anything at all. Then abandon them for the moment and take up some other work, *for dialogue must never be forced.*

A good plan when writing dialogue is to read out each page on its conclusion and test the words by the test of the ear. There is so much difference between the conviction carried to the brain by the eye and by the ear that it frequently happens that dialogue which “ reads ” admirably sounds more or less feeble, and, of course, vice

## Some Hints On Dialogue

versa. That is to say, the dialogue which would be quite excellent in a novel might fail to "get home" with the audience at a theatre.

Let the young dramatist, therefore, read out his lines, endeavouring as far as possible to act the parts en route. It is more than probable that whilst engaged in this process he will discover that certain lines are falling very flat, are entirely unconvincing. He can then set to work to put matters right!

In writing his dialogue the author should avoid what may be called "reminiscent" passages. That is to say, he should endeavour to let his characters refrain from long-winded histories of past events. The instant a man says: "I will now tell you the story of my life," people begin to yawn and look at their watches. Let the man's history be shown in its passage; directly one goes back and reminisces there is a tendency for the interest to droop and wither. Not invariably, of course, and this warning must not be taken too literally. There *are* cases which involve a certain backward glance. When these cases arise let the reminiscence be made as concise and as intriguing as possible.

Whilst commonplace, trivial dialogue should naturally be avoided, there is no necessity to rush to the opposite direction and coin out one's heart and brain in epigrams. Too many brilliant patches defeat their own purpose. The audience becomes so accustomed to the fireworks that they

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

are no longer dazzled, but merely wearied. Was it not Oscar Wilde, himself the prince of epigrammatists, who said on one occasion that every man, no matter how good a talker, should have "occasional flashes of silence"? Wilde's amusing suggestion is admirably adapted to the ethics of dialogue-writing. By all means think out some good and convincing epigrams, but use them as condiments, not as food!

Avoid long sentences when writing stage dialogue, unless the character is a caricature of a person who indulges in pedantic and flowery speeches. Keep the sentences as short as possible, for in genuine life people rarely speak in periods of twenty or thirty words at a time. They break off; they pause; they switch on to something else. There is no necessity for this kind of chaos in a play; indeed, it would be a very sad blunder, but a certain likeness to life may undoubtedly be achieved by the writing of short, vivid sentences.

Let us give an illustration by means of two passages dealing with the same matter. Here is the wrong way to do it. (A husband is pleading with his wife to forgive him for a lapse in connection with another woman.)

"Irene, I beg that you will listen to me for a moment and that you will not turn away from me until I have at least explained to you the situation as it reveals itself to me. That emotion for that other woman was but a passing and

## Some Hints On Dialogue

insane caprice. I assure you with all my heart and soul that all through that time you were always at the back of my thoughts—that always you held the high place there whilst she was but the distraction of an hour. . . .”

This is turgid, pedantic, insincere and wordy. Now let us consider the better way, though the writer does not, of course, suggest that it is a standard of perfection :

“ Irene, for God’s sake listen to me ! No ! No ! Don’t turn away like that ! Listen whilst I try to explain what really happened. It was just a mad caprice—it meant nothing. All the time you were in my heart and brain—that other woman was nothing but a moment’s distraction. Nothing, I swear it, before God !”

In actual life, one imagines, it would not be quite as smooth, but for stage purposes there must be some attempt at coherence. The author, therefore, must steer his course between the long-winded pedantry of the first illustration and the wild tumbling outburst of what would occur in the world of reality. In the result he should achieve something on the lines suggested in the second illustration.

Let your characters speak for themselves ; do not rely too much on a description of them by other people in the play. There is no reason, of course, why on occasions a set of people should not discuss another character, and to some extent herald his entrance by references to salient



## How to Succeed as a Playwright

characteristics, but gossip of the kind is apt to cause the interest to droop. In the old-fashioned French dramas, two servants at the opening of the play were in the habit of acting as a sort of explanatory chorus. This method is to-day entirely obsolete, and it was rather a clumsy device, even when utilized by such masters as Molière and Sardou and Scribe.

Never *pad* your dialogue more than you can help! Of course, it is difficult, if not impossible, in a full-length play to write dialogue that shall never infringe this rule, but if padding has to be employed, let it be *good* padding!

Let us furnish an illustration.

Your play has to run two-and-a-half hours. You have only six or seven characters, and the incidents are not sufficiently elaborate to carry the action forward without some kind of padding in the dialogue. You introduce a butler and you make him an amusing, quaint character. His quaintness does not help the story, but it gives you an opportunity to write a number of lines that will fill-out the performance.

Now, if you present this butler as a person who merely fires off mechanical epigrams or Cockneyisms of a humorous type, you are guilty of bad padding; but if you make his character, as reflected by his conversation, produce some kind of effect on his master, or his mistress, or on some dominating personage of the play, then you have achieved good padding, and all will be

## Some Hints On Dialogue

well. The play will be helped forward rather than dragged back !

This is a trite example, but it may serve the purpose. The point, of course, is this : that padding should *never* appear what it is, but should give the impression that it is an essential part of the general scheme.

Now for a word concerning expletives. There is a tendency on the modern stage to employ all kinds of emphatic language. Since Mr. Bernard Shaw introduced a certain sanguinary adjective into his play of "Pygmalion," there has been a positive orgy of picturesque expletives in all sorts and conditions of productions. We have had young girls using words usually associated with navvies. The name of the Deity has been dragged into farcical comedies, and used in situations where the employment of the name was certainly an error of taste, if nothing worse. That there will presently be a reaction against this foolish tendency there is little doubt, and in the meantime let us point out to the young author that the writer who indulges in too many expletives defeats his own aim. For the words become so frequent that they fail to arouse excitement, interest, or even resentment !

Once in a very blue moon a really "bad" word is not only justified but may enormously help the situation. When Shaw made his "Eliza Doolittle" use a certain adjective, he lighted up the character of his Cockney flower-girl with a

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

flash of characteristic illumination. But if "Eliza" had repeated that word scene after scene, nothing but nausea would have been excited in the audience, and the character would not have been emphasized by a single feature.

This matter is perhaps a very small one, but it must be noted, because one imagines that many inexperienced young dramatists may form the conclusion that their work will be strengthened and made realistic by oaths scattered through the play like pepper on curry.

A complete volume might be written on this subject of dialogue. The matter has been covered to a certain extent in this chapter, and in the subsequent chapters dealing with special kinds of plays it will be treated again in connection with its bearing on each individual class of work. The present chapter, however, has endeavoured to indicate the chief requirements for the writing of stage dialogue, and the hints, though brief and by no means final, may help the beginner to form some definite notion of the task that lies before him when he sits down to write his play.

## CHAPTER IV

### ENTRANCES AND EXITS

A GREAT deal of care and a great amount of skill has to be employed in contriving the various entrances and exits of the characters in a play.

In a story one can write of a certain character : " At this point John quitted the office." No explanation is required to account for his exit. In a play, however, the exit must be explained. If a man or woman suddenly quits the stage without a word of explanation, the audience begins to wonder *why* this happened. In a " crook " play, indeed, it is possible that certain observant members of the audience would imagine that some sinister purpose lay behind his action. Later, when nothing came of it, they would feel disappointed, surprised, and perhaps resentful.

In reading the plays of beginners the writer has frequently been faced with this defect : People enter and vanish for no obvious reason, and in the result a sensation of puzzlement is evolved that at once takes away the attention from the essential features of the play.

An excellent plan for the embryo dramatist is to study carefully the exits and entrances as set

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

forth in any play that has stood the test of time. Let him procure a copy of the piece and, putting aside for the moment any interest in the main episodes, let him see exactly how the skilled playwright gets his characters "on and off." He will see something like this :

The scene is a West End drawing-room. There are many people on the stage, guests at a reception of some kind. A famous explorer bidden to the house recognizes in his young hostess a woman with whom years ago he had certain love-passages. It is essential that as soon as possible these two shall be left alone. How is this to be contrived?

Now, the guests will be "got off" quite easily by the breaking-up of the party, but the husband and the wife's brother still remain. These two people can be "removed" thus :

HUSBAND (*addressing* BROTHER) : That's over, thank Heaven! Now, come along, Dickie, and I'll take you over that new wing! I expect as a budding architect you're bursting to have a look at it! (*Addressing* WIFE *and* EXPLORER) : And I expect you two are simply bursting for a yarn after all these years that you've not set eyes on each other. Ha! ha! Come along, old man, come along! (*Exit* HUSBAND *and* BROTHER.)

## Entrances and Exits

Quite simple, this! The stage is now left to the two protagonists. Moreover, if the action of the play require that the husband shall return in a few minutes, his return will appear quite natural. On the other hand, if he is *not* required again in that scene, his absence will occasion no kind of comment.

This illustration (not a brilliant one, perhaps) will serve its turn if it reveal to the young author a method of getting certain characters off the stage at certain moments. But great care must be exercised to cause every exit to look perfectly natural. Not for a moment should the audience feel, consciously or subconsciously, that it has been deliberately contrived.

More difficult, perhaps (for the inexperienced dramatist), is the problem of getting people *on* in scenes where they would not naturally figure. Once again, let us take an illustration.

The scene is a drawing-room in Park Lane. It is essential that a humble taxi-driver—a person not usually found in such surroundings—should for some purpose of the play be brought on in that scene. How is this entrance to be contrived.

Well, here is one method. A son of the house, a young ex-officer—generous, unconventional, and impulsive—has recognized in the fellow as he entered his taxi an old sergeant who served under him in France and saved his life. What

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

more natural than that the impulsive young man should insist on dragging the cabman into the house and introducing him to his people?

Or, the aristocratic dame who lives in the house might have left in a taxi a valuable bracelet and a bag containing her address. The cabman, an eccentric personage, "'aving no likin', my lady, for them blokes at Scotland Yard and not trusting them powdered flunkeys of yours," insists on forcing his way into the holy of holies and handing back the bracelet with his own grimy fingers. After a certain amount of humorous diversion has been extracted from the scene, the cabman can go on to do whatever the author desires. The entrance has been effected not only with perfect naturalness but even with a touch of humour.

Every author must think out for himself his method of getting his characters on and off, but the study of the methods of expert dramatists will often help him in that direction. These are technical matters, but they need not be lifeless technicalities. They can be made vital, interesting, plausible.

If you have a considerable number of characters in your play, keep down their entrances and exits. The constant strolling in-and-out of various people tends to break the continuity of the performance. Moreover, the process may easily confuse the audience. On the other hand, a play that

## Entrances and Exits

contains, say, only six or seven characters may allow itself a certain license in this matter of comings-and-goings. But, of course, there is no absolute rule on the subject, and exceptions may often arise with perfect feasibility.

Authors should be very careful to avoid the retention of irrelevant characters in a scene where their presence may divert the attention of the audience from the main protagonists. Let it be remembered that the attention and concentration of the average audience are very fragile things. The slightest trifle may serve to distract people from a main issue. Every actor knows only too well how one false movement—a step to the right instead of a step to the left, a look, a gesture—may at certain moments ruin an important situation. Still more deadly is the irritating presence of persons who have no intimate association with the scene in progress.

Sometimes, of course, the “atmosphere” of a certain scene renders it essential that irrelevant characters shall be strewn about the stage. For instance, in a café scene it would seem unnatural on certain occasions if the chief personages were left to themselves. The point, however, is this : that the café patrons who remain on the scene must efface themselves as much as possible. Let the dramatist in writing such a scene mark on his script his views in this connection. He can do it in this fashion :



## How to Succeed as a Playwright

COUPLE *at table up stage converse in whispers.*

MAN *at table up stage reads newspaper.*

THREE MEN *at table R.C. are playing dominoes. The business must be done unobtrusively and in silence.*

And now for a few words about the technical arrangements of exits and entrances. The young dramatist should dispense with detailed directions as to doors and other entrances. The producer will attend to this part of the work, and will probably do it far better than even the practised author. All that is necessary on the part of the latter is that he should simply indicate when a character enters and when a character goes out. He may, moreover, roughly suggest certain sittings-down and certain risings-up.

Nothing annoys the average producer more forcibly than the sort of thing represented in the following example :

(*Enter JOHN R.U.E. Goes to Table L. and sits.*) Or—

(*FRANK crosses down R. and then sits R.C.*)

These are technical stage-directions, and to set them down in a play in this rigid fashion is a very foolish thing unless an author is himself a professional producer and can visualize the entire scheme. Positions must be arranged at rehearsal, and even there they are frequently changed over and over again. Let the embryo dramatist bear

## Entrances and Exits

in mind this suggestion : If he happen to have a little stage knowledge and, anxious to exhibit it, fills his script with dozens of intricate directions, he will probably find all of them scrapped, and his time and trouble will have been utterly wasted.

On the other hand, if an author attend the rehearsals of his play, there is no reason why he should not sometimes confer with the producer regarding positions and technicalities of the kind. The sensible producer is usually ready to listen to such suggestions, and the author will be in an infinitely better position to make them when he is sitting in the stalls, watching the artistes, than when he is sitting at his desk at home.

In the old days, one heard a great deal about what was called "working up an entrance." If an important character were about to appear, everybody on the stage heralded his appearance with remarks leading up to the event. Or a tremendous clatter of hoofs would be heard "off"—the "hero" would speak a dozen words in ringing tones outside the scene—and a moment later would stride in to receive the plaudits of the audience which he would acknowledge cap in hand.

Luckily, all this sort of thing is dead and buried. To-day there is no necessity whatever to "work up" an entrance, and the most important "star" is willing to make his appearance without any kind of absurd fuss or heralding. Let the young dramatist bear this in mind, and

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

not spend sleepless hours racking his brain to devise sensational or striking entrances for his principal protagonists.

Finally, it may be said that the harmonious and convincing arrangement of entrances and exits cannot be taught in a handbook or in a dozen handbooks. The thing must be *felt* to some extent. A mere mathematical planning will not be sufficient. But the hints given in this chapter may at least show the budding playwright the perils and follies which he must avoid. His own good sense, observation, and practice must do the rest !

## CHAPTER V

### “ SCENIC ARRANGEMENTS ”

It has been said in a previous chapter that the young playwright would do well to avoid elaborate and expensive scenic arrangements. In the case of new authors, managers are naturally rather nervous. Whilst the play may seem to them a very excellent piece of work, they are probably not inclined to speculate too largely on its success. The author who submits a play containing scenery that would involve an outlay of £1,000 or £1,500 in scenery is not as likely to secure acceptance of his work as a writer who submits an equally good play requiring scenery costing, say, £150. This may seem a sordid kind of statement, but it contains solid truth.

On the other hand, there is no necessity for the playwright to mutilate his scheme because he desires to appeal to managerial economics. With a little ingenuity he can usually adapt his original notion to fit in with this important requirement. Let us take an illustration :

An imaginative young dramatist writes a play wherein an important episode is an earthquake. He pictures an elaborate palace or castle, and he

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

wants to show this building tumbling to fragments before the eyes of the audience. But he remembers that a scene of this kind would involve considerable outlay. What is he to do?

Here is a way out of the difficulty. Let the earthquake happen "off"—certain characters on an adjacent hill are suddenly terrified by thunderous noises. In a moment they realize what is happening, and one of them *describes* in terror-stricken voice the destruction that is taking place in the valley. The stage will be darkened. The thunder will continue—and the shrieks, screams, and groans uttered by the actors "off stage" will sustain the illusion of the awful catastrophe. The effect will be tremendous, and probably quite as good as the representation of the actual earthquake. The difference in the cost will perhaps be several hundreds of pounds!

In arranging his scenes the author should number them carefully. As far as possible he should avoid having more than one scene in an act. If he require two scenes, then let him remember that time is a very precious asset in theatres where plays have to be presented in two-and-a-half hours. Let him so arrange his scenes that the last may be set "inside" the second.

Once again, let us explain our meaning by an illustration.

In a certain Act, the author requires two scenes. One of them is a garden—the other is

## “ Scenic Arrangements ”

a library. Now it is quite easy to “ set ” a small room-scene within a garden scene, because a room need only occupy a very small section of the stage, whereas a garden or woodland must (as a rule) extend to a considerable depth. The inexperienced beginner would probably mark his Garden Scene, “ Scene 1,” and his room, “ Scene 2.” Exactly the reverse process should be followed. The “ Garden ” can then be set during the interval, and the “ Library ” set in front of it. The change would thus occupy only a few minutes. On the other hand, if this method were reversed, the change might occupy nine or ten minutes at least.

There are exceptions to this rule, and the writer does not wish to dogmatize too much on the subject. A garden “ cloth ” can, of course, be dropped in front of a big interior scene, but a “ cloth ” or “ drop scene ” never looks convincing and is practically out of date in the best theatres, though sometimes used in the smaller provincial theatres and playhouses.

It is quite a good plan, sometimes, to introduce scenes that are not too stereotyped. We know that the conventional scene is a house-interior (drawing-room, library, study, or kitchen)—a woodland or garden—a ship’s deck—a street. The author who can hit upon some novel (and inexpensive) setting should cultivate this gift. For instance, the interior of a lighthouse—the interior of a signal-box—a room in a tower, and

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

so on. The audience is always more or less intrigued by the sight of an unusual picture. One does not for an instant suggest that this kind of thing will redeem a poor piece of work, but if added to a sound and convincing scheme, it will undoubtedly enhance the enjoyment of the audience.

The dramatist should have every one of his scenes vividly visualized before he sets down the details in his script. Moreover, the actual scene rather than the stage-representation should hold the high place in his brain. For instance, if his scene is to represent a Thames island, let him endeavour to recall the actual picture exactly as he saw it with his own eyes when he was up the river. Let him put aside, as far as possible, the wood and canvas of the theatre!

In writing his scene-plot, the author should not indulge in too many details. Let him indicate the chief requirements of the scene, and leave the details to the producer and stage-manager. Sometimes, of course, the dramatist may have in view some special furniture—a special fireplace—or something of the kind. He should, of course, indicate his needs in such directions without emphasizing them too greatly. A young playwright who is too fussy at the beginning of his career may find that he receives very small encouragement.

There is no necessity to dilate very much upon the technical names of scenic things, but perhaps

## “ Scenic Arrangements ”

the following brief information may be useful to the embryo playwright who is entirely ignorant of life behind the scenes :

“ SETS.” Every scene that is not presented in the form of a “ cloth ” or “ drop scene ” is (usually) called a “ set.” We have an “ interior set,” a “ woodland set,” a “ garden set,” a “ barrack-room set,” and so on.

“ CLOTHS.” These are rarely used in the best productions except at the back of the stage. They are canvas “ drop scenes ” made stiff with wooden battens. These scenes are worked from the flies of the theatre.

“ WINGS.” In exterior scenes, certain canvas sections are used to “ mask-in ” the stage from the region outside. They are painted to harmonize with the general scheme of the “ set.” For instance, in a wood scene, one would have “ wood wings.” In a ship scene, one would have sea-wings or boat-wings. But not always. In the best productions wings are sometimes entirely eliminated, and the entire “ set ” is built up in such manner that the necessity for such additions does not arise.

THE FLIES. That is the name for the upper part of the stage. It consists of a gallery from which the curtain and other “ drop ” scenes may be worked



## How to Succeed as a Playwright

**BATTENS.** Battens are wooden strips used to stiffen the scenic canvas. The word is also employed to mean lamps attached to wooden lengths.

**ROSTRUMS.** When a scene requires built-up sections, rostrums or wooden platforms are employed. Thus, a staircase, a balcony, a rocky pass—all these structures are based upon rostrums, and are braced to the stage by means of iron clamps.

There are, of course, many other scenic details, but these are the principal facts, and the young dramatist need not concern himself too much about such technicalities. The information given here will be useful, however, because the author by means of this knowledge will be able to discuss matters intelligently with the producer and stage-manager.

Finally, let it be pointed out that the wise young dramatist will not "scamp" his scenes. He must not imagine that because he has secured an admirable plot and an intriguing set of characters he may pay small heed to the matter of scenery. Let him think out very carefully and very closely the best setting for his play. The right scene coming at the right time may make an enormous difference to the ultimate fate of a piece of dramatic work!

## CHAPTER VI

### THE "CROOK" PLAY

AT the time of writing (1928) the form of entertainment commonly known as "The Crook Play" is ruling the dramatic world both in Great Britain and the United States. Audiences seem obsessed by a love of criminal investigation. Theatres are packed night after night and matinée after matinée with eager-eyed men and women of all ages and every rank of society.

The result of this extraordinary outbreak of interest in crime has led nine young embryo dramatists out of ten to sit down and write a "crook" drama. They imagine that they have merely to produce a play bristling with mysterious noises, hands, and apparitions, work in a "super-detective," and that the thing is done. Nothing could be further from the truth. As a matter of sad fact, quite a number of "crook" plays have proved hopeless failures. One or two of these efforts, quite ambitious in their way, have run for little more than a fortnight! For the writing of a drama of this kind is by no means as easy as it may appear at first sight.

Moreover, a word of warning may be useful

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

at this point. There is the possibility that at any time in the near future, this craze for crook plays may die the death it deserves, for it is certainly a very second-rate form of dramatic art. The wise young dramatist would do well, therefore, to abstain from concentrating too much on this class of work.

Now, having given this warning, let us go on to modify it to some extent by pointing out that there will *always* be a market of some kind for the really brilliant drama of crime. In future days it may take a new form ; but seeing that love of mystery and of excitement is an essential part of human nature, there is small likelihood of the "crook" play ever disappearing entirely from the theatre, though the craze may dwindle into a common-sense demand.

In a former chapter we suggested that the "guessing" game that nowadays is so popular in "crook" entertainments is by no means good art. It was pointed out that the essence of dramatic construction is that the audience should always be in the secret which is concealed from the characters of the play. The tendency of the fashionable "crook" drama is to leave the identity of the detective or of the criminal to the very last moment. But this practice has two perils :

1. As already hinted (in Chapter II) the "guessing" process tends to divert the attention of the audience from concentrating on many minor issues.

## The " Crook " Play

2. It is very difficult for the secret to be kept. It is true that the newspaper criticisms on the day following the production loyally abstain from giving away the intriguing truth, but there are always " friends " who have seen the piece and insist on telling you who are going to see the piece next day, the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. The result is that when you sit down in your stall, you know exactly that the person who really killed the millionaire was the laundress, or the catsmeat man, or whichever exceedingly unlikely personage the author has imagined. The play, accordingly, does not interest you to any extent, because the author has devoted all or most of his energies to building up a mystery. Let that mystery be revealed, and you may drop off to sleep at once !

Now, on the other hand, if the audience is in the secret *at the beginning*, then their interest will be legitimately aroused and sustained by the developments, by the fact that innocent persons are suspected, and by a dozen other circumstances which the dramatist of ingenuity will of course devise. No longer will there be the foolish necessity to beg Press representatives not to " give away " the secret. The play will travel on its own merits and not degenerate into a mere " guessing " competition on the part of the audience.

The majority of " crook " plays are written round mysterious murders, but the young writer

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

would do well, if possible, to think out other crimes. Let him endeavour to follow the example of Arnold Ridley, the author of "The Ghost Train" and "The Wrecker." Mr. Ridley, in the former play, hit upon the brilliant idea of a supposed ghost train. In reality, the train was an exceedingly live affair, and was used by a band of criminals for conveying guns to a Bolshevik gang who, by inventing the story of the haunted station, caused people to avoid the spot and thus to render them immune from detection.

In "The Wrecker," the author has conceived the idea of a series of mysterious railway accidents. Incident follows incident with amazing excitement, and the climax comes in a lonely signal-box when "The Wrecker," having murdered the signalman, once more endeavours to bring about a terrible accident. The device by which the calamity is averted is a stroke of genius. Let young authors study this play, for although it certainly forms one of the "guessing" class of crook dramas, it is so brilliantly conceived that it forms an admirable object-lesson in the way the thing should be done.

We have mentioned Mr. Arnold Ridley in preference to other authors of crook plays because he appears to have travelled clean away from the stereotyped murder episode. As a matter of fact, a very wide field awaits the treatment of dramatists who wish to write plays of the "crook" order.

For instance, there is the department of poison.

## The "Crook" Play

With the exception of "Belladonna," one cannot recall any recent play wherein this silent and terrible weapon has figured to any extent. A play dealing with the effects of some new and hitherto unclassified drug might make a wide appeal.

Hypnotism, moreover, has found few exploiters. "Trilby," of course, is not a crook play, but the hypnotic element in that drama undoubtedly helped the general scheme.

Let the embryo dramatist go to the British Museum Reading Room or another full-sized and well-equipped library and study famous crimes of past centuries. He will presently encounter some highly intriguing subjects, and probably still more intriguing circumstances.

If a personal reminiscence may be forgiven (seeing that it is entirely relevant) the writer would point out that when he was engaged in making researches for a recent volume, he encountered a huge number of extraordinary facts, any one of which might have formed, if not the basis of a crook play, at least a most vital episode. Truth, as you are aware, has an amusing little habit of being stranger sometimes than the strangest story of the fiction-writer. The dramatist should study from the life-records of crime. Even if the episodes recorded are not always suited to his purpose, they may serve to switch his brain on to a track where strong, suitable incidents may easily evolve.

It is well in writing a crook drama to keep

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

down the number of characters. Apart from any desire to appeal to managerial economy, this practice is a very good one, because it is essential that the audience should not be confused by the sight of too many persons wandering on-and-off.

And now for a few words about what is called "love-interest" in this class of play. There is no doubt that in some cases the main interest of the drama is weakened to some extent by the introduction of a conventional heroine and the man who has to make love to her. Nevertheless, wherever possible, some kind of love-interest should certainly figure even in the "crookiest" of dramas. The audience love a feminine interest. The sight of a young woman in gorgeous frocks at the mercy of ruffians rarely fails to cause them enormous satisfaction. That she must defy the crooks is, of course, an essential qualification, but let the playwright beware of making the young woman too conventional a figure. There is always the tendency on the part of the writer who merely "drags-in" a heroine to portray her as a sort of lay-figure. This process is a very foolish one. The author should bestow as much care on his heroine as on his "super" crook. He should invest her with some novel and intriguing characteristic.

On the other hand, he must not go to the opposite extreme and allow the love-interest to *dominate* the criminal section. If that happen,

## The " Crook " Play

then the drama becomes a sort of love-story at once, and is no longer a " crook " play. One cannot serve God and Mammon in the theatre or anywhere else. In other words, one can have only *one* predominating factor in a play. If there are two factors of equal dominance, then each tends to weaken, if not to cancel, the other. Just as in the human body, no two pains can co-exist with equal force, so in the drama. . . .

This point may appear to be over-elaborated by the writer, but he feels impelled to emphasize it, because the tendency of many inexperienced scribes lies in the direction of this very serious blunder.

Let us now consider the question of humour in " crook " plays. It may be said at once that whilst a humorous element running through certain scenes is not absolutely essential (there is none in " Dracula," for example, and that play is a very considerable success), nevertheless the author who can with naturalness and with ease infuse a certain humour will do well to cultivate this gift.

In old-fashioned melodrama which usually dealt with villainy and with virtue of the " penny plain and twopence coloured " kind, the serious and the comic scenes were divided into watertight compartments. One was harrowed by a heart-breaking farewell between the hero and the heroine for ten minutes or thereabouts. A moment later, a burst of rollicking music would herald the entrance of



## How to Succeed as a Playwright

the "comic" man and the "comic" woman, and in a minute the audience was roaring with laughter. Dickens employed this method, and it was one of his chief defects as an artist. Modern melodrama (and crook plays are, of course, pure melodrama) goes on different and more sensible lines. The comedy is scattered throughout. The detective following up his clues may evoke merriment, and as long as his comicalities do not encroach on a very exciting or critical moment, everybody is satisfied.

The plays we have instanced in this chapter, "The Ghost Train" and "The Wrecker," teem with humorous incidents and dialogue. "The Silent House," another crook drama, is by no means as gloomy as its title would suggest. "Raffles," a classic in its way, has many humorous episodes. "Crime," an entirely admirable American crook play, presents plenty of fun. "Broadway," another American success, contained far more laughs than thrills. And so on.

And now for a word or two concerning construction. There is no doubt that many crook plays are poorly built. They convince the audience at the moment, but the critic, going home, begins to ask himself certain questions which might disturb the author's equanimity if he were allowed to hear those questions. How came it that one of the characters happened to be on the spot at a certain moment? Why did the detective

## The " Crook " Play

go to the " den " alone when he might easily have had a posse of men near the house? Why was that scene in Act 2 suddenly darkened for no reason that the plain man could perceive? In the excitement of the actual performance, matters of the kind naturally escape criticism. But when they are regarded in cold blood, they appear absurd and unreasonable.

Critics often say that crook dramas must not be taken seriously, and there is perfect justice in their suggestion. The point, however, which the writer desires to make is this—that crook dramas might easily be taken seriously if they were seriously and consistently built up. Consider, for instance, that model of construction, " Sherlock Holmes," originally played by William Gillette. Every episode in that drama could stand the test of hard criticism. Arthur Conan Doyle, the most conscientious of writers, built up that play as an architect plans his house. Every episode was natural and sequent. An algebraical equation could hardly have been more complete.

Now, let the young author strive after something of this kind. Let him abandon the invention of episodes and scenes merely to secure a sensation. Let him criticize each incident and ask himself this question :

" Does this incident arise naturally out of the story, and will it stand the test of examination when the excitement aroused by it has had time to cool down?"

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

If the answer is "Yes," then let him go ahead with his work; if the answer is "No," let him scrap the incident and think out another. There is no reason on earth why a crook play should not be a good work of art—on a lower plane, perhaps, than what is called a "high-brow" drama, but equal in artistry to the best of that category!

One word more! Of late years, there has been a tendency on the part of American playwrights to send over crook dramas wherein the audience are called upon to take a certain part in the performance. In a play called "The Last Warning," the scene of which was a haunted theatre, policemen sat in the stalls and entered from the auditorium at the end of the piece and rushed on to the stage to make an arrest. In another piece of this kind, a man sitting in the stalls shot an actor on the stage. The idea of the ingenious authors of pieces of this kind is that if a play within a play is being enacted, then the real auditorium may figure also as the sham auditorium.

This practice is not only disconcerting to the audience, but is moreover a piece of profoundly bad art. One of the most rigid rules of the theatre is the rule of the "fourth wall." This means that there is an imaginary wall between the persons of the play and the persons of the audience. The entrance, therefore, of policemen and others from the front of the house means

## The " Crook " Play

that the wall has been broken down or that, ghost-like, the intruders have passed through it.

It will not do ! Not only is it bad art, but it is utterly unconvincing. The stage is the stage—the auditorium is the auditorium. That early Greek dramas frequently involved this practice is the plea of certain ingenious playwrights ; but obviously their knowledge of classic methods is limited. Otherwise, they would know that in the time of Euripides and his colleagues, plays were to some extent religious ordinances, in which naturally the audience took part. When a festival of the God Dionysus was being celebrated, it was entirely right that the people watching the play should feel their association with the actors. But to-day, when religion is not associated with theatrical performances, the practice is utterly inexcusable and should be scrapped at once.

It is interesting to note that almost *every* play that has involved this idiotic and ridiculous effect has failed in this country. The failure may not be due to the matter in question, but there is certainly a very remarkable coincidence involved. Perhaps as a nation we have too much sense of the fitness of things to enjoy so illogical an exhibition. Let the writer of " crook " dramas avoid this practice and keep his action rigidly within the confines of the stage !

## CHAPTER VII

### THE FARCICAL COMEDY

OF all forms of dramatic work, the farcical comedy (at its best) is perhaps the most difficult to write. The monetary rewards when it proves a success are proportionate to that difficulty, for perhaps there is no class of piece that yields a richer harvest. The characters are usually limited—the scenery involved costs little—and so a huge amount of profit is earned. For farcical comedy appeals to practically every kind of audience. Whereas in the matter of other species of plays certain pieces may appeal primarily to men, and others to women, farcical comedies are beloved by men, women, and children. Indeed, the Christmas holiday season usually includes at least two revivals of old-time successes of this “genre,” for juvenile folk often prefer a clever farce to a childish pantomime.

Let the young author beware, however, of certain time-worn plots which nowadays should be avoided. One does not wish to dogmatize too much on this point, and an occasion might easily arise where one of these moth-eaten plots *might* achieve a certain success, if skilfully treated. But it is perhaps wise not to take the risk.

## The Farcical Comedy

Here are the chief offenders :

1. The mistaken identity plot. A pugilist is mistaken for a clergyman because they both live in the same set of flats. The usual absurd complications arise, and after two hours of cross-purposes and of blunders which a child of twelve might perceive, everything is set right five minutes before the fall of the curtain. Modern audiences hold (and hold with truth) that whilst a mistake of the kind might on rare occasions happen in actual life, the mistake would be put right long before complications of any dimensions could possibly follow.

2. The "Errant" husband motive. Farces of this type, so popular twenty or thirty years ago, derived from the Latin races. In their original shape, they were probably far funnier than in our more unelastic English. Moreover, the bowdlerizing process, whilst it pleased the late Mrs. Grundy, tended to take away much of the sparkle and brightness of the original theme. In these farces we had gay young husbands pursuing naughty actresses or ladies of facile virtue, returning, of course, to the pious fold of matrimony at about five minutes to eleven every evening.

3. The "Parvenu" plot. This usually centred round an illiterate but good-natured vulgarian, who, having amassed a fortune in butter or pork (usually pork), entered Society and made a fool of himself.

There are, of course, other old-fashioned plots

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

which the modern author should avoid, but there is no necessity to go into further detail. Let us now ask ourselves what are the chief essentials for a good farcical comedy.

First of all—and this is highly important—there should be a novel and intriguing story. Secondly, there should be what is called “pace”—that is, the action should move with tremendous rapidity. Thirdly, there should be characters which, whilst peculiar and amusing, bear some resemblance to life. The grotesque absurdities of old-fashioned farce should be rigidly barred.

Perhaps one of the finest models that the young dramatist could study would be a farcical comedy produced in London a few years ago, called “It Pays To Advertise.” Here we have an entirely new plot—an entirely new set of characters. An irresponsible and lazy young son sets out to beat his own father, a millionaire merchant, at his own game of advertising. He scores a huge success, and at the finish we find that the whole scheme was planned by the old man himself in order to reform the slacking habits of the youth. Scene follows scene with the swiftness of a panorama—the dialogue is bright, vivid, crisp. Humorous images are suggested, and those images are worked into the entire scheme of the play.

This farce combines the three essentials we have named. The plot is original—the pace is swift—the characters whilst, of course, exaggerated in many ways, are human and convincing.

## The Farcical Comedy

The old wire-pulled puppets of the former times will certainly not prove successful to-day.

Let the young author when setting out to devise a play of this kind dig in his brain for a really quaint and novel basis. Let him bear in mind that the most humorous dialogue and the most comic situations will rarely redeem a plot that is poor and trivial. For the point is this—that if the groundwork be weak, then the climax is bound to be still weaker. It may happen then that the audience, having laughed to some extent during the progress of the play, suddenly find themselves utterly disappointed and disgruntled a few minutes before the finale. The result is that the applause is feeble—the critics go away to blast the piece, and one more failure has been added to the gloomy list!

A good plot carries its own weight! Always remember that fundamental truth. Examine the successful farcical comedies of all writers from Maddison Morton to the author of “It Pays To Advertise,” and you will find that there is a good, sound foundation.

And now for a few words about characterization in farceland.

Avoid stereotyped characters. Don't introduce the deaf old uncle, the irritable old Indian officer, the namby-pamby curate. Forget the time-eaten and never very funny mother-in-law who in farces of the 'eighties and 'nineties would sometimes cause some half-hearted amusement. Do not



## How to Succeed as a Playwright

endeavour to extract humour from a Cockney maid-of-all work who drops "h's" with mechanical precision and is decorated with an eternal smudge upon her cheek! Scrap all those people if they have for a moment or two occurred to you, and concentrate on real life, with this important addition :

### EXAGGERATION !

Exaggeration is the keynote of the farce. You build upon a purely natural and lifelike basis of character and then proceed to emphasize and to colour. For instance, in the admirable farce we have quoted, "It Pays To Advertise," we have a father who is experiencing perfectly natural resentment against a son who refuses to work. But whereas in real life or in a serious play the old gentleman would devise some commonplace method of causing the youth to "sit up and take notice," in the region of farcical comedy, he hits upon a most fantastic and wildly comical scheme. But the point is, that underlying even the most fantastic machinations, there *must* be an element of truth and nature.

Let the embryo dramatist, therefore, in contriving his characters for a farce, select certain persons and proceed to exaggerate to some extent and with a large amount of discretion the characteristics of those persons. A stout man may be very, very stout—a thin man may be absurdly thin, and so on. A man with a fad concerning diet may

## The Farcical Comedy

dilate upon his fad and make a perfect fool of himself. He may enter the house of his friends, bearing sandwich boards proclaiming the virtues of wholemeal bread or of a certain brand of nut-food ! He may attend an aristocratic reception clad in bathing-costume if he happen to be a clothes-faddist. All these things which would be barred in "straight" comedy are permissible in farce. But let it be noted that beneath all the exaggeration, there is a tiny foundation of nature and of truth.

As regards the theme of farcical comedy, the author must, of course, resolve this for himself. But there is one everlasting rule that can hardly be bettered, and it was laid down by a brilliant dramatist. Here it is :

"GET YOUR CHIEF CHARACTER INTO TROUBLE AND KEEP HIM THERE UNTIL A FEW MINUTES BEFORE THE END OF THE PLAY !"

Not tragical trouble, of course. The anxieties, the perils, the complications, must be of a sort that lend themselves to humorous treatment. On the other hand, one *may* sometimes have a tragical basis comically treated. In "The New Clown," a famous farce of the 'nineties, a young aristocrat, believing that he has killed a man by accident and may be arrested for murder, joins a circus troupe and becomes a clown. All sorts of complications follow. At the finale, of course, we find that the supposed victim was not dead and everything ends to a merry note. Had

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

the man been really dead, the play would have been entirely ruined as a farce. It is well, however, to note this example, because there is no reason why the main episode should not on occasions be a serious one. The point is that the seriousness must prove a comicality in disguise!

The troubles of the chief protagonist must be cumulative. They must go from bad to worse. The climax described in a previous chapter must be carefully elaborated.

A love interest should invariably figure in farcical comedy, but must not overshadow the main feature. The sentiment must be subordinated to the fast and furious fun. An attractive heroine is a splendid asset to every species of play, especially nowadays when the woman element is a very essential factor in every department of fiction, whether in book form or dramatic shape.

Keep your characters on the move all the time. Figure yourself as a sort of literary policeman and let your slogan be, "Move on!" The instant you let down the pace, your play ceases to be a farce and becomes too much like a serious drama. This is, perhaps, the most important point to bear in mind.

Finally, it may be said that obviously no handbook can teach a man how to write a farcical comedy or any other kind of play. But the hints given here may at least show the beginner what to avoid and may switch his brain on to the track of certain important and indeed vital essentials.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE "STRAIGHT" COMEDY

WHAT exactly is a "straight" comedy? the novice may ask. Well, it is not very easy to define, but it may be suggested that a comedy of this kind is one that, whilst rarely involving the very serious issues of drama, nevertheless may deal with certain subjects in more or less earnest fashion.

Let us take a recent example—perhaps one of the most brilliant examples in modern play-composition. We refer to "Spring Cleaning," by that remarkable writer, Mr. Frederick Lonsdale.

"Spring Cleaning" is the story of a sober-minded novelist married to a young and quite attractive wife. Whilst the husband is engaged in strenuous work, she surrounds herself with degenerate and frivolous society. The husband, disgusted by her gradual deterioration, and suspecting an intrigue, horrifies her friends and herself by introducing to a dinner-party a young woman from the streets. His idea is to show them that the professional love-trader is preferable to the amateur.

The guests depart in fury. Later, the young woman, a sympathetic and delightful character,

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

becomes the *dea ex machina* and by certain ingenious contrivances causes the threatened elopement between wife and lover to collapse. The play ends with the complete reconciliation of husband and wife. The man's purpose has been achieved, and the "spring cleaning" is complete!

Now here is an old story treated in a masterly and novel manner. Over and over again, in plays and in novels, we have met the studious husband, the semi-neglected wife, the lover waiting round the corner. But Mr. Lonsdale, by hitting upon that illuminating and intriguing episode of the introduction of the girl from Piccadilly, immediately lifted his comedy into the region of new and vivid life.

It would be well for the young writer to buy a copy of this play and study it very carefully. He will perceive the following important things :

1. Novelty of treatment.

2. Crispness of dialogue. Whilst there is no straining after epigram (and nothing is more wearisome than the everlasting flashing of verbal fireworks), there is nevertheless no touch of the commonplace. Each character speaks naturally and yet forcibly. Every remark rings out with the incisiveness of life plus brains.

3. Distinctness of characterization. Each character is an individual. Where brilliant dialogue is invented to display the author's talent in that direction, everybody talks exactly like everybody else. Indeed, one might cause the

## The "Straight" Comedy

characters to speak each other's lines without affecting the sense in any way. But in this comedy every line spoken belongs to the character that speaks it, and to none other.

The student of this play will also perceive that each episode is treated with a certain light seriousness, if one may use a seemingly paradoxical expression. There is nothing heavy—nothing solemn. Even when the novelist-husband is denouncing the parasites and the degenerates in a white-heat of indignation, he uses the language of comedy and not of serious drama. He is light, bright, ironical, amusing in his satire and his invective.

One does not wish, of course, to divide plays into watertight compartments too rigidly, but there is no doubt that if a writer sets out to write a comedy, he must keep his work within certain boundaries. The rock on which many straight comedies split is the rock of indecision. The author not entirely certain of himself will at times degenerate into farce. Another author, equally misguided, will incontinently wander into serious drama. The audience is confused. It never knows "where it is," if the colloquialism may be forgiven. And that kind of confusion is always more or less dangerous to the fate of a play, no matter what may be its character.

The "straight" comedy should never be obviously didactic—that is to say, it must never strive openly to teach a lesson in ethics or indeed in any

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

department of life. It may illustrate a man dominated by a certain ethic, but if his obsession tend towards a sermon that is prolonged throughout the play, then the comedy has failed to justify its name.

Let us take another illustration. In Alfred Sutro's admirable comedy, "The Walls of Jericho," we have a clean-living, clear-thinking Colonial faced with the frivolities and inanities and immoralities of a certain section of Society. His attitude towards life is the attitude of the idealist and the reformer.

Now, if this man obtruded his views throughout; if the play clearly proved that the author wished to show the rottenness of certain fashionable people, then it would probably have missed its mark and have proved a complete failure. But mark how ingeniously Sutro contrived his scheme. He showed us the man trying to resign himself for his wife's sake to the pettiness and vanity of an artificial life, and indeed doing his best to fall into line. But events crowd upon him that force his revolt. Eventually, in one supreme outburst, he denounces the whole business and blasts Society with a blast like unto the trumpet of the prophet Jeremiah, whereat the Walls of Jericho collapsed. Eventually the wife, overcome by his storm, abandons her London friends and returns with him to Australia.

In this comedy the wild outburst, the dramatic denunciation, was confined to *one scene*. There was no boring series of platitudes, no long-winded

## The "Straight" Comedy

set of sermons. The play ran its course lightly and brightly, illumined at the conclusion of the act by the outburst which we have noted. And even in that outburst, the rules of comedy were carefully observed. The husband never rose to the heights of tragedy—the emotion was intellectual rather than passionate.

One does not wish to suggest, however, that a lesson should never be conveyed in comedy. Molière, Sheridan, Shakespeare himself, frequently conveyed an ethic, but the point is that the thing must be skilfully and adequately masked. Let us sum up the matter thus :

The audience throughout the performance, scene by scene, must be amused, interested, intrigued. They must not perceive that any kind of lesson is being taught. But if, when walking home, it suddenly occurs to them that the author certainly *did* convey a kind of lesson, then the process has been carried out with perfect skill and has achieved its end !

It would be well for the young dramatist to ponder this matter very seriously, for it is of the highest importance. If comedy were never to convey an ethic, the world would have lost some of its choicest masterpieces. The point is that the thing must be done with a certain art. The schoolmaster's mortar-board cap must never be in evidence. He must wear the guise of cap-and-bells !

One cannot dogmatize concerning the theme of



## How to Succeed as a Playwright

comedy. The author must think out his own plot. If, however, he can concentrate on some tendency of the time, without necessarily being topical to the point of red heat, so much the better. Noel Coward, for instance, has achieved wonders with the theme of the modern woman and the cocktail habit. The obvious drawback, however, to plays dealing with more or less current themes is that these plays soon become "dated." But if they are worth their salt, that will not matter to any great extent. If the story is strong, the characterization true to type, and the dialogue convincing and natural, the play will probably outlive its date and bear revival from time to time.

The old, old triangle of the husband, wife, and lover, frequently appears in this class of play. It is a theme of which audiences will probably never grow weary, for the reason, perhaps, that many men and nearly all women in the audience like to imagine themselves in similar thrilling positions. Entirely well-behaved as regards their own lives, they sometimes enjoy a vicarious pleasure in seeing the exhibition of the vagaries of other people. Subconsciously they may ask themselves: "What would *we* do if situated thus?" A woman sitting in the stalls or gallery, whilst contented with her home and husband, may experience a flutter of excitement as her brain flashes the query: "How would *I* behave if a man asked me to go away with him as that man on the stage is doing now. . . ?" And so on, and so on.

## The "Straight" Comedy

There is no harm in these half-formed thoughts : they are probably forgotten within ten minutes of the fall of the curtain. The playwright, however, would do well to bear in mind this subjective tendency, for once let men and women imagine themselves in the positions of the mimic characters, and their interest is immediately roused and stimulated.

The "triangle" theme must be handled with huge discretion. Never must it degenerate into pornography, nor must it be handled with a heavy touch. The audience must have a notion at the back of their brains that nothing really tragic will ensue. The issues involved may be serious issues, but in comedy they must not travel to too serious an end.

Let us take an illustration once more. Imagine that in a "straight" comedy the heroine at the finale has to leave her husband. Now, in a play with a really serious foundation, the audience would feel that the separation was decisive. There would be no coming back. But in comedy the curtain would fall on some cynical suggestion that the parting was merely a half-hearted affair and that the wife would be coming home again sooner than her husband might desire. This is not by any means a perfect illustration, but it may serve its purpose to drive home the writer's point. Or assume that a comedy ends with a husband eloping with another woman, one cannot have the wife left despairing. The finale might show her

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

ringing up somebody else's husband to take her out to dinner! The playwright must, of course, develop his own scheme, but he must *never* allow comedy to darken into drama!

In modern comedy, it is well, if possible, to get a cynical note into the dialogue and to avoid as much as possible any touch of sentimentality. There is a hard metallic tendency in fiction and in the theatre to-day, and the dramatist who wishes to find a market for his work must to some extent fall into line. Twenty or thirty years ago, comedies of the "Sunlight & Shadow" type (perfect little works in their way), pleased audiences for many months on end. They were impact of sentiment, leavened with gentle humour. Whilst prophecy is always dangerous to some extent, one must nevertheless hazard the view that if that delightful comedy were revived to-day, it would fail to draw audiences. It is true, of course, that a piece of the "Marigold" order may succeed in spite of its lack of cynicism and its breath of sentimentality, but "Marigold" is set in early Victorian times, when emotion of the kind was as much a part of life as antimacassars and the Prince Consort. Bring "Marigold" up to date—dress her in short skirts and shingle her hair—and the play would have to be entirely remodelled before it could appeal to our modern playgoers.

However, it must be pointed out that the young dramatist should not overdo the hard, non-sentimental note. Nor is there the least necessity to

## The "Straight" Comedy

cultivate a deliberate cynicism. A man must write as he feels. The point is that the treatment must be aloof and critical rather than sentimental and emotional.

The writer hopes that he has not been too dogmatic in this chapter. He has based his remarks on present-day tendencies—a day, moreover, which may endure in a theatrical sense for many years to come. Time running ever in cycles may at some remote date bring back the sentimental comedy, but that time need not be considered in a handbook dealing with immediate and urgent needs.

Moreover, the remarks made in this chapter need not be taken too literally. For it is conceivable that a brilliant dramatist might write a comedy which broke all the rules set down and yet win a decided success. But rules are made for the many—not for the exceptions. The beginner would do well to consider the elementary facts presented in the foregoing lines. When he goes to the theatre, let him compare those statements with what he sees and hears on the stage. For, only by a judicious blending of theory and practice can he hope to write a good comedy or indeed any kind of dramatic work.

## CHAPTER IX

### MUSICAL COMEDY AND REVUE LIBRETTO

THE authorship of musical comedy and *révue* is so often a tandem or indeed a multiform affair that the beginner would probably find himself in harness with an experienced author who would indicate to him many of the roads. However, a few words may prove of service in this connection.

First of all, let it be said that the day of the inane musical comedy, with its infinitesimal and absurd plot, seems entirely dead or at least moribund. The fact that writers of the P. G. Wodehouse type are now engaged in this class of work proves to some extent that a superior article is required, and that managements are no longer content to rely chiefly on the music and the humours of the comedians.

Good sound plots are wanted. "The Desert Song," "The Vagabond King," "Mercenary Mary"—all these recent successes are examples of the new movement in the region of musical plays. Let the young author, therefore, set to work to evolve a plot that shall rank to some extent with the plots of serious plays in originality and strength.

## Musical Comedy and Revue Libretto

The author need not concentrate too much on dialogue. As long as this is clear, incisive, fairly amusing and natural, it will probably meet the case. In musical comedy the comedians are allowed great license. There is no necessity to spend long hours inventing brilliant quips for these performers. They themselves will bring their talents to the invention of amusing "gags" and jests, and indeed it is said that certain outstanding comedians actually write their own parts. This is perhaps something of an exaggeration, but there is more than a grain of truth in the suggestion.

The author should devote more of his time to the dialogue spoken by the non-comedy people—that is by the hero, the heroine, and the other characters who will stick to the "book" and speak the dramatist's lines and not their own inventions.

An excellent asset to a musical comedy is a novel or intriguing setting. Some years ago there was a craze for musical pieces with Japanese or Chinese surroundings. If a young author happen to have lived abroad in some region beyond the beaten track, he might do worse than bring that region into his musical piece, providing, of course, it will admit of picturesque treatment. A sojourn in Wigan or in the coalfields of Northern France would, of course, hardly justify such action. . . . But imagine that the potential musical-comedy writer has lived in Java, in a South Sea Island, or some country

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

of vivid colour, then he might be well advised to turn his experience to practical account.

Musical comedies rarely run beyond two acts. There should be a decided contrast between the scenic setting of the first act and the setting of the second. Usually, one scene stands throughout an act, and is a very carefully built-up affair. There is no reason, however, why a piece of the kind should not run to three acts if the author cannot see his way to construct his work within the limits of two sections.

Musical comedies usually deal with modern life, but one imagines that there might be considerable scope for authors who cared to break into past ages. There is no obvious reason why history should not figure in plays of the kind. One might conceive a delightful musical piece written round "Henry The Eighth," for instance. The vagaries of the too-affectionate "George The Fourth" would furnish material for a whole-hearted and intriguing play with music. And so on. . . . But if the author choose an historical subject, let him be careful to select one that will bear frivolous treatment. For instance, "King John," or "Robespierre," would be entirely out of the running.

The "love-interest" in this class of piece must invariably be very strong and must run right through the play. The "heroine" need not be a strikingly original figure. On the other hand, there is no need to present her as the lifeless

## Musical Comedy and Revue Libretto

wooden puppet whom we so often see in musical comedy—a puppet probably made attractive by the charm and beauty of the actress playing the part.

All the characters should be clearly defined and should stand out. Let the author take care not to write slovenly characterization on the assumption that the music will redeem his own carelessness. Let it be remembered that the music only forms a part of the scheme—the singers are not singing all the time. Whilst it is true that an audience does not demand of the characters in musical comedy that they shall be the lifelike portraits of the serious comedy, it does at least expect that they shall resemble something human!

The lyrics of musical comedy are frequently written by a variety of people, but if the author of the “book” can achieve good verse, he should certainly write as many of the lyrics as possible. If he has small gifts in this direction, let him leave the work to others.

The author who has a “flair” for musical comedy would do well to cultivate it enormously, for a successful play of this class will probably outrun all other species of dramatic work.

And now for a word or two concerning that entirely modern form of entertainment called “révue.”

It is hard perhaps to define accurately the nature of a “révue.” Originally, this class of work came from France, where it justified its



## How to Succeed as a Playwright

name by reviewing humorously and critically current events and current plays. In this country, *révue* no longer devotes itself exclusively to matters of the kind. Indeed, the lower class of touring “*révues*” is merely a hotchpotch of nonsense, strung together without any kind of leading motive, sustained chiefly by the humours of the comedians and the limbs of the chorus ladies.

Recently it was said that *révue* in London was dying; and at the present moment, undoubtedly, there does not seem any great demand for this kind of entertainment. The writer inclines to the view that presently it will return, and that there will always be more or less scope for work that criticizes in humorous way the crazes, the foibles, and the general events of its period.

*Révues*, like musical comedies, are frequently the work of many hands. Sometimes four, or even five, people contribute to the general stock of wit, or want of it!

The young author who wishes to write *révue* should first of all make himself acquainted with the principal plays running in Town. He should, moreover, be a keen student of the daily newspaper, noting the events that elicit the keenest and most frequent attention. If he can write short brilliant burlesques of current plays, he is well on the way to becoming a successful *révue*-author.

And now for a few technical hints:

A *révue* should rarely play longer than two hours, or at most two-hours-and-a-half. Each

## Musical Comedy and Revue Libretto

item should be crisp, pointed, and, of course, complete in itself. Moreover (and this is a most vital requirement), the author must take care that time is given to the performers to change their clothes between the items. For instance, if the principal comedian has to appear in Item 3 as a cabman, one must not write No. 4 Item, showing him in full evening-rig. The items must be contrived in such manner that the Company "take turns" and thus have a certain amount of time wherein to arrange their changes. Of course, once in a way, a very quick change can be admitted, and special means would be provided for the actor, but wherever possible, this sort of inconvenience should be rigidly avoided. Révue performers have to change their garments so often when playing in révéues that they do not wish to be rushed more than is absolutely necessary.

SCENES. These should be simple and inexpensive. Whilst in the case of isolated spectacular révéues of the kind occasionally seen at theatres of the Hippodrome (London) type, elaborate and even gorgeous scenery may be permitted, the révéue managements usually prefer to spend their money on artistes rather than on wood and canvas.

References to religious questions should, of course, be rigidly barred, nor should political quips be introduced too liberally. The writer should concentrate on follies, crazes, and fashions of the

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

day, taking care to be as topical as possible. His incidents should be as fresh in the memory of his audience as the events of the morning newspaper. Moreover, the briefer he can render his topical references the better. A long-winded, clumsy speech might easily ruin a complete scene. Brevity, the soul of wit, is both body *and* soul of *révue*!

Verbal trickeries, such as puns, for instance, should be avoided, though perhaps on rare occasions a very exquisite pun or a very vile one might be permitted. But no writer should cultivate the punning habit to any degree. In the old-fashioned burlesque, it became at length a nuisance, and probably helped to kill that form of entertainment.

An excellent feature of *révue* is the mock melodramatic sketch. The playlet starts as a tragic affair. At the finish some entirely commonplace *dénouement* sends the audience into roars of laughter. For instance, we see a dark room in a lodging-house. A haggard man declares that he has not a penny left to him. The agony is piled up. Everybody imagines that the wretched fellow is completely "broke." There comes a knock at the door. Another man enters hurriedly. Then the supposed penniless wretch darts at him, and asks for the loan of a penny to set the gas-meter going. "Rotten luck, but I only have two halfpennies," says the other man, and the curtain falls on the two of them pouring from

## Musical Comedy and Revue Libretto

their pockets half-crowns, shillings, and Treasury Notes, with never a *penny* between them !

This is not a brilliant illustration, perhaps, but it will serve to show the sort of thing that is often welcomed in this class of playlet.

However, the author must not introduce too many of these "trick" sketches in his *révue*, or the process will become monotonous. He should limit them to two or three at the most, and be careful to keep long intervals between their occurrence.

*Révue* authors need not waste time on titles, nor need they concern themselves with any thread to hold their work together. In the early days of *révue*, a sort of guide or "Compère" would appear at the beginning and proceed to guide the players through the mazes of the entertainment. In this way, a kind of homogeneity was given to the various scenes. But to-day the process is obsolete in the majority of cases. As for titles, almost any catchy label will meet the case. The management or the producer will often suggest a title, and probably find a better one than the author could contrive. But to those young writers who are inclined to be superstitious, the writer would offer a mild hint in this connection. The word "London" has invariably proved so wonderful a mascot to plays that if the *révue* author can somehow work the name of that city into his *révue*-title, let him do so ! One can hardly recall a single play wherein the word "London"

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

has figured that failed to prove a huge success.

Révue lyrics, like musical comedy lyrics, are frequently the work of several people, but here, again, if the author of the *révue* can write good verse, by all means let him do his own lyrics.

Finally, it may be pointed out that the embryo dramatist who does not feel himself capable of a complete *révue*, may submit to a management an isolated item in the form of sketch or playlet. These items are usually bought outright and do not carry a royalty payment.

Every young writer who wishes to work in the medium of the theatre should certainly try his hand at *révue*. Not only is it a bracing form of literary labour, but it may easily pave the way for more ambitious and more serious work.

## CHAPTER X

### THE ONE-ACT PLAY AND SKETCH

IT may be said at once that at the present time (1928) there is no great demand for one-act plays, called in former times "curtain-raisers." These little plays were useful at a time when theatrical entertainments were far more prolonged than is the case to-day. When a performance began at 7.30 p.m., a "curtain-raiser" was necessary to entertain the pit and gallery before the late diners came in for the play of the evening. In these days, when few curtains rise before 8.30 or 8.15, one play is sufficient. However, there is still a scope in some directions. Play-producing Societies will frequently produce plays of this kind if they possess exceptional merit. Moreover, theatrical publishers will (occasionally) purchase outright a good one-act play suitable for amateur production. In view of this special market, the writer of one-act plays would do well to keep his scenic requirements as simple and as inexpensive as possible.

The basis of the play of this kind should be *one vital episode*. There must be no side-issues. Moreover, as the piece runs only for half-an-hour, or at the most 50 minutes, the interest must begin

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

at the very moment of the rising of the curtain. There must be no "frills"—no elaborate character-drawing. Each character must stand out clearly at the outset.

There is no reason why a one-act play should not be a perfect work of art. Indeed, the fact that the entire action passes within the actual time of performance tends to give this form of play a unity that can rarely belong to plays that run to several acts. That this medium can present the finest efforts of the dramatist is proved to some extent by such masterpieces as "The Twelve Pound Look" of Sir James Barrie, and his later playlet, "Barbara's Wedding." Here we have one dominating episode, treated with perfect adequacy within the compass of half-an-hour or fifty minutes.

The element of gloom should be avoided. That is not to say that sad subjects should invariably be barred. Barrie's little play, "Barbara's Wedding," which we have just mentioned, is impact of pathos. But the author has treated his subject with a dozen light and joyous touches. There is laughter, but never the laughter of fools. At the end of the play, the spirit of the spectator is purged by pity, love, and sympathy. The point of these remarks is that one can imbue one's playlet with pathos, but one need not darken it with gloom.

Barrie is indeed a perfect model for the man who desires to write one-act plays. This supreme

## The One-Act Play and Sketch

miracle-worker has a "flair" for the exact subjects which will form the basis of a short play. He chooses an episode that does not lend itself to extended treatment, but which is nevertheless intriguing, and above all, human. Consider as another example "The Old Lady Shows Her Medals." The ineffable pathos of old age is here crystallized into half-an-hour's traffic of the stage, and, like April sunlight, there plays upon the pathos the comedy of life.

The number of characters should, as a rule, be kept down, but there is no reason why on occasions that number should not be extended, if the action of the piece demands such treatment.

The finale of the one-act play should perhaps be more striking than the finale of the several acts of the full-length play. Nowadays, there is a prejudice in some quarters against "working-up curtains," as the technical phrase puts it. Many dramatists prefer to drop their curtains on comparatively uneventful moments. (Mr. John Galsworthy belongs to this band, for whose attitude there is a great deal to be said.) But seeing that in a one-act play the sense of continuity cannot be broken by intervening "finales," it would be well for the playwright to endeavour to end his playlet with some dramatic rounding-off. An entirely "tame" finish may leave the audience cold and unresponsive, even though the bulk of the play has been quite excellent!

Quaintness may form the leading characteristic



## How to Succeed as a Playwright

of a one-act play. The vagaries of an old Scottish couple—the prejudice of an old Puritan against certain frivolities of life—the passion of an ancient antiquary for certain works of art—any subject indeed that lends itself to quaint treatment forms a fine basis. For, the very eccentricity or foible which would be tedious in a three-act play will divert and amuse people for half-an-hour.

As regards dialogue, there is nothing to be said in addition to what has been written in previous chapters. There is no essential difference between the dialogue-requirements of the playlet and the requirements of the full-length production.

And now for a word or two concerning what are known as “ sketches ” :

This name was applied originally to playlets presented at music-halls, because those places were not allowed by their licence to perform stage-plays. The “ sketch,” beginning as a sort of duologue, eventually expanded into a species of little play, and for some time controversy raged between theatre and variety-hall managers concerning the rights and wrongs of the innovation. Eventually, a sort of compromise was evolved. It was held that sketches might be performed at music-halls, providing the time of performance did not exceed thirty-five minutes and the number of characters six in all.

The young dramatist who desires to provide sketches for variety-theatres should bear in mind

## The One-Act Play and Sketch

this proviso, which, after all, is not a great hardship, seeing that thirty-five minutes provides excellent scope for action and dialogue, and six characters are sufficient for any short play.

Sketches may be dramatic or humorous, but let it be said at once that the former kind of work is not wanted to any great extent on the music-halls. The bright, amusing sketch has the better chance, and if it prove really successful it may have a very extended run. Fred Emney's little comedy, "A Sister To Assist 'Er," was produced over fifteen years ago and is still played. Moreover, it has been broadcast and filmed!

Young dramatists contemplating sketch-writing should remember that a music-hall audience is not as quiet and as concentrated as a theatre audience. The effects should therefore be broader to some extent, and the action should be as vivid as possible. Many sketches fail because their authors write exactly as if they were writing for a solemn and devoted Sunday Repertory Theatre audience, who look upon dramatic art as a species of religion. A variety theatre is a restless theatre. The everlasting change of "turns," the lighting of matches, the filling of pipes, the strolling out for refreshments—all these things tend to produce an atmosphere of inattention. That is why the sketch-author must concentrate all his energy on "getting" his audience the moment the curtain rises. He has no time for slow developments. If he fail to "get" the audience within the first

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

five minutes, he will (probably) never reach them at any moment, and the sketch will perish at its birth.

In planning a sketch, the author should, if possible, ask only for an interior scene or a plain "garden" or "wood" set. Music-hall managements do not like to go to any considerable expense in connection with these matters, though, of course, in special cases, they will be ready to take a risk. Sometimes, too, the person presenting the sketch will provide special scenery, if absolutely necessary. It is best, however, to rely on the "stock" scenery that every decently-equipped variety theatre invariably possesses.

Writers should concentrate on incident and on plot rather than on brilliant dialogue. There is no necessity for epigrammatic talk. If possible, there should be a "laugh" in as many lines as possible, but the laugh may arise naturally out of the situation rather than out of any straining after wit.

Compactness is one of the chief essentials. Let everything be clear-cut, concise, easy, and plausible. Concentrate (as a rule) on a very attractive part for the woman of the sketch. Make her lovable or hateful, make her meek or mischievous; but make her stand out somehow, and all the time! The feminine interest is to-day the dramatist's "strongest suit."

Finally, it may be pointed out that, although there is to-day a decided slump in the variety

## The One-Act Play and Sketch

theatres of this country, there is no reason why the sketch should not continue to be in frequent demand. For it is now proposed by a huge syndicate to inaugurate throughout the Kingdom an immense number of kinema-houses wherein variety shows shall be combined with the exhibition of pictures. The sketch will thus have an excellent chance of holding its place. Moreover, it may enjoy a new and even intenser period of life.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE PLAY WITH A SERIOUS INTEREST

A PLAY with what is called a serious interest usually (though not invariably) presents a theme concerning which there may be debate and question. In former years plays of this kind were massed together under the generic heading of "Problem Dramas." Too often they were stodgy, didactic affairs, with the schoolmaster "touch" impregnating every scene. The "problem" plays that succeeded were those that presented their problems without too much obtrusion of the didactic element. Arthur Pinero achieved a very great success with "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray." Here we had the problem of the courtesan transplanted from the life of the restaurants and the night-clubs to the monotony and weariness of a typical English country house. The result was tragedy. Throughout the run of the play the behaviour of "Paula Tanqueray" formed a hot topic at dinner-parties and elsewhere. Would such a woman have behaved thus? people asked. Would the husband have done this or that? And so on. This play, a masterpiece in its own "genre," contrived to present an

## The Play With a Serious Interest

intriguing problem without a single intrusion of the schoolmaster or parsonical element.

Let the young author who desires to present a serious theme bear in mind the danger of becoming didactic, for that is his chief peril when he sits down to construct a serious play. Let him remember that his characters must work out their destinies according to their tendencies and not according to any rigid view which he himself may entertain concerning vice or virtue.

One must not dogmatize too much, however, on this point. We can certainly call to mind the plays of such men as Brieux and Galsworthy, plays wherein a viewpoint of the author is driven home with force. Brieux, in "Damaged Goods," clearly showed that he viewed with horror the notion of marriages between persons of degenerate tendencies. Galsworthy, in "Justice," set out to show the horrors of the solitary confinement methods in British prisons. But because these masters have been able to present interesting works with their own views thrust home throughout, it does not follow that the average dramatist can achieve a similar result.

The best plan for the embryo playwright who wishes to write a serious play is to select a theme which appeals to him with vital intensity, and then obliterate his own views on that theme. Let the audience when they are leaving the theatre ask themselves this question :

"What did the author really think about it?"

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

Did he approve or disapprove of the main issue? Were his genuine sympathies with the man or with the woman?"

The springing-up of such questions proves that the dramatist has effaced himself, that he has succeeded in presenting a problem without posing as schoolmaster or moralist.

Let us now consider three excellent specimens of modern serious plays. We will begin with Miss Clemence Dane's "Bill of Divorcement."

Miss Dane assumes that the period of her play is a time when the Divorce Laws have been amended and a husband or wife can secure a divorce by reason of the prolonged insanity of one of the parties. The story shows how a woman who believes that her husband will remain insane for life becomes engaged to another man. Shortly before the marriage, the husband recovers and comes to claim his wife. The problem arises—what is she to do? Is she to desert the new lover to whom she is profoundly attached, or is she to turn her back on the wretched man who emerges from the misery of the asylum to seek solace and love in her arms?

Miss Dane has set forth her scheme, and gives us no clue to her own views. Whether or not she approves of the amendment of the Divorce Laws—the amendment which will render such problems possible—she does not tell us in the play. She has done her work properly : she has set the problem, and left the audience to find their own elucidation !

## The Play With a Serious Interest

For our second example, let us choose "Rain," by Mr. W. Somerset Maugham. To a certain tropical coast village come a missionary and his wife. Forced to remain in the village by a rain storm that continues for many days, the missionary, fanatical and earnest, endeavours to reform a young *fille de joie* who is also stranded there. But in the very act of reformation his physical nature succumbs to her attraction. In a night of madness he goes to her room. In the morning, overcome with self-horror and remorse, he cuts his throat.

This is the story briefly told. What exactly did the author wish to convey? Did he desire to prove that the physical longings of man must in certain circumstances outweigh the spiritual longings, or did he wish to show that it is dangerous for any man to attempt a reform when he is not certain of his own strength?

Mr. Maugham has kept his secret to himself. The audience can form its own conclusions. But, apart from any problem, the play has proved vitally interesting.

The last example is August Strindberg's "The Father." We have a man who is always brooding over life. Eventually, by an ingenious incident, he forms the theory that neither he nor any man can be certain of the parentage of his children. This haunting thought pervades him. His wife, a dominating woman, quarrels with him concerning their daughter and her career. This matter forms the basis of a battle that runs through



## How to Succeed as a Playwright

the play. At the end the woman wins. The husband, half-insane, is to be sent to an asylum. The curtain falls on his complete effacement and submission.

Strindberg's theory, as we know, takes the form of an obsession concerning the tyranny of woman in all domestic relations. He has emphasized his theory in this terrible play, but he has not told us his views in schoolmaster fashion. He has not expressed an opinion as to whether the husband was right or whether the wife was right. Perhaps each was right and each was wrong. We leave the theatre debating the question. As a work of art, a problem play, written without any touch of the didactic spirit, "The Father" has done more than entertain us : it has given us matter for thought not only for a day but for all our lives !

Let the young dramatist who contemplates a serious play bear in mind that his work must be of that order which will stand the test of remembrance. It must not only stir the heart—it must agitate the intellect !

And now for a few words on the purely technical side of the matter.

A play with a very serious interest may run to four acts, but it is well, whenever possible, to keep the action within the compass of three acts. If, however, the author feel that he cannot divide his interest into three sections, then let him spread himself over four acts, or even five. If an audience is sufficiently alert-minded and sympathetic

## The Play With a Serious Interest

to attend the performance of a serious play, it will not object to this extension of scenes. The development of character that serious drama sometimes necessitates cannot always be compressed into three acts. This is a very important matter, and the author will do well to give to it his close attention.

The question arises—should a serious play hold any kind of comedy? Yes, undoubtedly! But the comedy must be comedy of wit and character, and certainly not comedy of situation. One can impart into the most serious of plays a quaint and amusing personage, providing, of course, that he help the story. One can impart also a number of humorous and witty words, but a comic situation may ruin the entire harmony of the scheme.

Let us take an illustration, otherwise our meaning may not be entirely clear. Imagine a serious play in which there figures a very narrow-minded clergyman. Now this man may rouse laughter on many occasions by his foolish and grotesque observations on life and conduct, but he must not figure in an absurd situation. He must not be locked up in a room with a chorus-lady who frightens him by making love to him! He must not be mistaken for somebody else, and evoke laughter by his absurd efforts to set matters right. These things belong to farce. Thrust them into a serious play, and the audience is at once puzzled, confused, disturbed. But, if the parson, in the course of conversation, *merely referred* to what he

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

might do in such embarrassing circumstances, and by that reference caused a lot of laughter, then his place in a serious play would be perfectly justified.

It is well that the young author should note these facts. There is no reason on earth why his serious play should be shrouded with gloom. Let him lighten it with as much wit and humour as he can invent, but let him keep the play entirely clear of comical incidents and happenings.

It has been said by some critics that every serious play should deal with some universal theme. But this requirement is far too rigid. One can easily imagine an excellent drama of serious interest dealing with some local aspect. For instance, there was a recent drama dealing with the hardship of the unqualified "osteopath." This could hardly be called a universal theme, but the play was a fine piece of work and gained a very huge success. On the other hand, a play may appear to outline a purely local theme, but may embody a universal truth. Ibsen's "Enemy Of The People" is a good illustration. Here we have a conscientious doctor ruining his career, his home ; losing friends, wife, and children, because he will not bolster up a lie concerning the waters of the town which afford his profession a means of living in comfort. "A purely local affair," says the superficial spectator. But as a matter of fact, the play represents the universal battle between materialism and idealism, between falsehood and truth.

## The Play With a Serious Interest

It will be seen from these remarks that the author of the serious play has a very wide scope. He can make his theme local or universal, and, providing he brings sincerity, observation, wit, and some knowledge of dramatic construction to his task, he should turn out a good and potentially successful piece of work.

One cannot lay down any hard-and-fast rules about the number of characters in plays of this kind. As a rule, for economic reasons, it is always well to keep down the number (as we have already suggested), but the author must not let himself be cramped or hampered by these considerations. There is no reason, however, why a serious piece of work should not be unfolded admirably by half-a-dozen or, at most, ten people! In none of the three pieces mentioned in the foregoing lines do the casts exceed ten or eleven persons.

Inexperienced authors, when writing a serious play, may feel inclined to let their characters soliloquize and even indulge in the old-fashioned and absurd "asides." Let both these worn-out and unconvincing methods be rigidly avoided. No sane man in actual life delivers himself of loud or whispered asides with half-a-dozen people within a few feet of him. Nor does any man, unless he is pining for Hanwell, talk to himself in set speeches. That Shakespeare and other classic writers caused their characters to soliloquize proves nothing, except that dramatic methods have

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

changed since the time of Elizabeth, and changed for the better.

Let the dramatist avoid, moreover, the introduction of the "raisonneur," or middle-aged, good-natured friend, so frequent in the plays of the 'eighties and 'nineties, and to be met, on occasions, in the theatre of to-day. It is true that in the hands of such men as Arthur Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones, this sort of character may prove interesting, especially if interpreted by an actor of versatility and charm. But the average writer and the average actor rarely succeed in making him anything but a first-class bore!

What exactly was the "raisonneur"? Well, he was a man usually in the forties or fifties, unmarried, and therefore able to view matrimonial differences with the eyes of an umpire rather than of a player. He was wise, witty, bland, tolerant, stern sometimes in a sympathetic fashion, but always and everlastingly self-satisfied and highly plausible. Modern playwrights, as a class, rarely introduce the "raisonneur," and they are perfectly justified in this exclusion. He is a direct descendant of the chorus of Greek tragedy—one of the worst forms of boredom ever conceived by the brain of man, ingenious in its capacity for wearisome inventions.

And now for a word concerning the old, old question of the "happy ending." There is no reason why a serious play should not finish with tragedy. Somebody may die, somebody may go out into the wilderness, some dream may perish!

## The Play With a Serious Interest

But cynical as the assertion will seem, there is little doubt that if a dramatist wish to make his play appeal to the largest number of men and women, he must endeavour to finish on a note of peace if not of actual happiness. Nor is this ending necessarily inartistic. When Arthur Pinero wrote "The Profligate," he made his chief protagonist kill himself at the finale. The audiences on the opening nights were vexed. Pinero, yielding to pressure, allowed him to live, and this admirable and noble play ran for very many months. No artistic sense was outraged here, because it was quite conceivable that "Dunstan Renshaw" might find himself forgiven by the wife whom he had injured and thus turn his face towards life rather than towards death. The point of these remarks is that the young author need not imagine that in giving a happy ending to his serious play, he is *of necessity* committing an artistic sin. He may be writing of the very thing that would naturally and artistically take place.

This has been a somewhat long chapter, but a chapter of many times its dimensions would hardly be sufficient to deal with the many ramifications of the serious play. But perhaps enough has been written to indicate certain broad requirements. The embryo author must supply the deficiency by the study of actual plays and by the reading of books that deal with the subject as a special matter and not (as in this case) as a subject among very many other topics of discussion.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE ROMANTIC OR "COSTUME" DRAMA AND THE ADAPTED PLAY

AT the present time (1928) there is no great demand for what is called the "romantic" play—a play usually dealing with some period other than our own. But there is no doubt that Time, working in its usual cycles, will bring this class of drama again into the scope of practical theatrical politics. Let us devote a few words to the subject.

In choosing a period for his romantic or (as it is sometimes called) his costume play, the author should exercise huge discretion. The era of the French Revolution has formed a very useful period for dramatists, and there is no doubt that the successes made by "The Only Way," "The Dead Heart," "The Scarlet Pimpernel," and others that dealt with that cataclysm, will be repeated in the future, providing that authors can hit upon some novel story and some illuminating treatment. The age of the Roman Cæsars has been successfully exploited by "The Sign of the Cross" and "Quo Vadis?" Between the period of decadent Rome and the period of regenerated France, there exists a gap that has never been adequately filled by modern dramatists. It is amazing that the gorgeous opportunity has been ignored.

## The Romantic or "Costume" Drama

One can recall only one modern drama dealing with the Inquisition—and that drama, "The Wandering Jew," embodied the Inquisition merely as a final episode. It does not form an essential section of the scheme. One imagines that several exciting plays might be written round that terrible age when the Church dominated the Western world.

On the other hand, there are periods which rarely lend themselves to successful theatrical treatment. Plays dealing with the Puritan regime have frequently been only *succès d'estime*. They have not attracted large audiences for any length of time, but comedies dealing with the Restoration period have more than once scored huge triumphs.

The young writer, having selected his period and his plot (and the plot may be historical, partly historical, or imaginary), should proceed to soak himself in the period by means of studying books, MSS., prints, pictures, costumes. He should try to bring himself to the point where he may almost believe he is actually living in the period of his play! A mere aloof and academic knowledge of dates and facts will not be sufficient to give colour and warmth to his work.

A romantic play frequently runs to four acts, and sometimes to five. The "production" usually being on a larger scale than the production of modern plays, the author is allowed a certain license. Moreover, the number of characters need



## How to Succeed as a Playwright

not be kept down, but may extend to any point within reason.

And now for a word concerning dialogue. Whilst stilted and pretentious language should be rigidly avoided; whilst, moreover, the absurd "cliché" of the "thou" and "thee" type should be entirely forgotten, the language must never degenerate into modern colloquialisms. In a recent drama dealing with Biblical times, one of the characters, after an impassioned outburst, used the word "bluff." At once, the harmony of the scene was broken. If, instead of saying: "Nay, 'tis a bluff!" the man had said: "Nay, this is but a trick to deceive us!" the harmony would have been preserved. There are certain authors of romantic plays who actually indulge in Americanisms, and cause their characters to speak of "stunts" and "bosses." Their defence is that if people are talking colloquially, they must use a tongue that imitates the colloquialities of the audience. An entire fallacy! On the same assumption, the performers should wear modern clothes! If the romantic character of a romantic play is to be sustained throughout, the note of modernism must never for an instant send its discords through the theme.

Romantic plays may perhaps be more "melodramatic" than modern compositions. The "situations" at the finales of the acts may be more extravagant, more pointed, than the "situations" of a "straight" comedy of present-day life. If

## The Romantic or "Costume" Drama

the curtain can fall each time on an effective picture, so much the better. But this is not to say that mechanical and sensational effects are to be invariably developed. But whereas in a play of modern life, for example, one could hardly drop the curtain on a woman defying a man with a dagger or a knife, this episode would be entirely permissible in what is called a romantic drama. In "The Only Way," we may see Sydney Carton standing on the steps of the guillotine. In a modern drama, we cannot have the hero on the hangman's scaffold! These two illustrations are trite, perhaps, but they may serve to indicate the writer's meaning.

The love-interest must, of course, be a very dominating factor in the romantic play. But let the playwright beware of making his heroine of the soft, clinging type, simply because she happens to be a creature of romance. A mechanical, conventional heroine is a blot on any dramatic work; in a romantic drama, where the love-interest must filter through every scene of every act, she is more than a blot: she is a complete disfigurement. Let the author, therefore, think out a lovable and intriguing heroine, and take as much pains with her as with his "D'Artagnans," his "Scaramouches," and his "Claude Duvals."

Character may be emphasized in romantic plays. Whilst one must not have the immaculate hero and the Satanic villain of ancient melodrama, one may invest the personages with a certain

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

sensationalism which would not be permitted in modern work.

Where the play deals with historical events, the author need not feel himself chained too closely to academic history. He may follow the example of Alexandre Dumas, Harrison Ainsworth, and, more recently, of Stanley Weyman. He may take the leading facts from his authority, and rely upon his own imagination for the subordinate details. Even Scott, the most accurate perhaps of all historical romancers, occasionally twisted things to his own schemes!

Romantic plays are sometimes written in verse. The practice is not to be recommended. In the first place, few dramatists can write really good verse; and in the second place, still fewer actors can speak it with distinction and with ease. Strong, nervous prose, with Saxon words predominating—and with Latin words eliminated as far as possible—is perhaps the best medium for this class of play. Words derived from the Greek should *never* be employed. They are nearly always polysyllabic, and tend to destroy the atmosphere of the play. Imagine Robin Hood, for instance, talking of “Metaphysics” or “Psychology.” The mere notion rouses laughter.

Historical novels may sometimes be adapted into very successful plays. Stanley Weyman’s “Under the Red Robe” ran for years. Justin Huntley McCarthy’s “If I Were King” had a similar success in play-form. Nearly all Dumas’s

## The Romantic or "Costume" Drama

historical novels have formed the bases of more or less successful dramas. "The Only Way," founded on "A Tale of Two Cities," has been played by Sir John Martin Harvey for over thirty years, and still draws large audiences. The list might easily be extended.

Finally, a word of warning! If an embryo dramatist is essentially a "modernist" in thought and feeling, let him refrain from attempting a romantic play dealing with bygone times. Once in a very blue moon, such a man may make a success of his endeavour, but the chances are at least ten to one against that result. Quite recently we had an example of a dramatist who has written some of the most brilliant of "modernist" plays failing sadly when he wrote a romantic comedy. Without sympathy, there cannot be understanding. If a writer do not sympathize with the period of his play, he cannot bring to his task the necessary "grip" and intuition which shall make his work a thing of art or even of commercial value!

And now, let us consider the question of adapted plays.

Plays may be adapted from novels, from short stories, or from foreign plays. The work is not easy, and the young writer would be well advised to refrain from the task until he has gained a certain experience with original work.

Many plays founded on stories have been hugely successful. In addition to those we have noted in

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

a preceding paragraph, we may recall "The Prisoner of Zenda," "John Chilcote, M.P.," "The Constant Nymph," "The Beloved Vagabond," "Tess of the D'Urbervilles," "M. Beaucaire," and many others whose names will be well within the recollection of the present generation. But the young dramatist must not jump to the conclusion that a successful novel will of necessity make a successful play. Experience shows that an intriguing and supremely interesting story may fall flat and lifeless when presented in a theatre.

If a writer has in mind a novel which he wishes to dramatize, let him read the book very carefully, trying to *visualize* certain essential scenes as they would appear on the stage. If he possess any kind of dramatic sense, he will speedily determine whether or not those scenes would carry the same conviction in the playhouse that they carry in the pages of the book. If he decide that the value would be impaired, let him scrap his scheme at once !

Adaptations of novels are, of course, made by arrangement with the novelist. Frequently the latter prefers to do the work himself ; but where this does not happen, there is scope for the dramatist. He must apply to the author and arrange terms with him. Sometimes an author suggests collaboration. It is always wise to accede to such a suggestion, because the collaboration will make the task easier, and the name of the original

## The Romantic or "Costume" Drama

author as part-adaptor will give weight to the production.

Plays may sometimes be adapted from short magazine stories. It rarely happens, however, that a short story lends itself to full-length play-treatment, but a notable instance of such happy adaptability is supplied by Mr. Somerset Maugham's "Rain." This remarkably successful play was founded by the author on a short story from his pen that had appeared in a well-known magazine. Perhaps even more notable is the case of "The Passing Of The Third Floor Back." The basis of this famous play was a short tale by Mr. Jerome K. Jerome that appeared many years ago in a journal that has long since joined the majority. The story lay buried in that forgotten magazine until it occurred years afterwards to the author that it might serve as a medium for the talents of Sir Johnston Forbes Robertson. It served so well that when Sir Johnston returned from America with a long tour of that piece, he brought back with him £250,000!

Sometimes a young author who has written magazine tales might experiment with one of them in play form. But he must remember, always, that the media of play-writing and story-writing are distinct and must not jump to the conclusion that because his story proved interesting and exciting in the magazine it will prove similarly attractive on the stage.

Finally, for a word about adaptations from

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

foreign languages. Usually, an unknown author has small chance in this direction, because immediately after the successful production of a play abroad, it is bought for England and America by enterprising managements or "entrepreneurs." These firms then give the adaptation commission to some well-known writer. However, the embryo play-adaptor may sometimes find a chance with foreign plays that have not attracted very wide notice at the time of their production. Assume, for instance, that a few years ago, a farce or a drama was produced in Paris, meeting with success, but not penetrating to other countries. The enterprising young adaptor might then get into touch with the dramatist in Paris and propose terms to him.

Adaptation is not easy work when foreign plays are concerned. Usually it is unwise to convert them into plays with a British environment. Far better is the plan to preserve the original setting, because the translator is dealing with a different outlook, a different code of morals, and a dozen other different matters in addition. A French farcical comedy pitchforked into an English setting is rarely a convincing piece of work. (A German play, usually, has more possibilities in that direction, because the Saxon races are more akin.) Nor is this remark applicable only to frivolous work. Serious plays are subject to the same difficulty. In dealing with what are called sexual matters, the Latin races frequently hold views

## The Romantic or "Costume" Drama

diverse from our own. If, therefore, the play is thrust into an English house, there is at once something wrong with the atmosphere. "Park Lane" may appear on the programme, but the "Faubourg St. Germain" somehow lingers in the brain!

There is no necessity to dwell further on this matter of adaptations, because the scope involved for the new dramatist is not great. But if a young playwright feel that he has a *flair* for the work—if, moreover, his knowledge of foreign tongues is exceptionally good and, above all, idiomatic—then there is no reason why he should not, on occasions, secure work in this direction, work which may sometimes prove not only interesting, but highly remunerative.



## CHAPTER XIII

### RADIO DRAMA

RADIO drama is still at its beginning. Although broadcasting has been in existence in this country for several years, small headway has been made in the writing of plays that will exactly suit the special requirements of the ether.

It must be admitted that the financial encouragement has been somewhat lethargic. At the present time, the usual remuneration for a short radio play is two guineas per performance, though in the case of members of the Society of Authors and Playwrights, the rate offered is slightly larger. It must be understood, however, that these figures are not necessarily rigid, but are the figures in vogue at the time of writing (1928).

In writing radio drama, the author must bear in mind the important fact that only the ear is involved and that the eye plays no part in the business. He has the task of conveying by the medium of the ear alone what is conveyed in the playhouse by a variety of factors, including speech, action, gesture, make-up, lighting, and scenery !

A good, striking, and original plot is, of course,

## Radio Drama

a very useful asset, but what is perhaps even more important is that the story should be told in a facile and convincing fashion. Pauses for effect—pauses which on the theatre stage may be explained by some action of the performer—must be entirely avoided. The dialogue should be crisp, concise, and immediately to the point.

In view of the fact that the time of performance is usually brief, it is well to guard against over-elaboration of plot and incident. Concentrate on vivid, terse dialogue. Don't waste a single line! Let each character be clear-cut. A good plan is to allow the characters to address each other by name throughout the play; in this manner, the listeners will be spared any doubt as to their identity. Moreover, it is advisable to christen the characters with names that are easily recognizable by reason of their frequent occurrence. If a character is labelled with an unusual name of which the listeners have never heard, they may fail to identify it with the person concerned, and the story may be seriously prejudiced.

Radio drama lends itself admirably to the "eerie" form of play. When the ear alone is concerned without the aid of the eye, there is always a fine opportunity for mystery. If we are sitting in a very quiet room at night and we hear a sound, but cannot trace its origin, we are at once intrigued, perhaps a little terrified. For exactly the same reason, an "eerie" play *heard*

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

and not seen will probably thrill more than any visible representation in a theatre.

There is no reason, however, why the young radio dramatist should confine himself to plays of this kind. Many other fields may be covered with success. Light, humorous plays, containing an intriguing episode, are sometimes welcomed, but the dialogue must be "plain-sailing" throughout. There must be no subtle shade of meaning which on the theatre stage might be assisted by the gestures and the facial expressions of the artistes. To use a simile from cricket, the dialogue in this class of play has to score entirely off its "own bat."

The number of characters should be kept down to the lowest point. The question of economy enters into this matter to some extent, for the broadcasting authorities naturally do not wish to involve themselves in more expense than is necessary. But, apart from any financial question, there is always the risk of confusion and misunderstanding if too many characters are thrust into a radio play. When comic operas or musical pieces are being given, the objection does not arise in the same degree, because here the music is the chief factor, and if the listeners are a little hazy about the identity of the persons, it really does not matter much, though even in these cases a clear understanding is always preferable.

Regarding the time of performance, this should not (as a general rule) exceed half-an-hour, and

## Radio Drama

sometimes it should be even less. On the other hand, in the case of special pieces (such as the musical entertainments referred to in the preceding paragraphs) an hour or more might be permissible. It would be well, however, for the reader not to follow these estimates too literally, because broadcasting entertainments are in a state of transition, and developments frequently arise that upset previous statistics and figures. The general data, however, may be relied upon as a fairly constant basis.

“ Effects ” are very useful things in radio plays. The young dramatist, however, should not requisition too many of these, nor should he demand unusual sensations. Wind, rain, thunder, the crashing of a door, the report of a rifle or a big gun : all these things can, of course, be easily reproduced by the “ property master ” at the studio, but a far-fetched “ effect ” should not be introduced. It might involve special expense and trouble, and perhaps prejudice the acceptance of the little play, unless the work were of such exceptional merit that the authorities felt prepared to incur any kind of trouble in order to present it.

It is a mistake to imagine (as some young writers do imagine) that only famous authors are requisitioned to provide radio plays. On the contrary, the humblest scribe has an excellent opportunity. His best plan would be to study carefully the plays offered him by his own wireless set. He should then try to evolve a drama or comedy which,

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

whilst not a slavish copy, comes within the general scheme of the existent plays.

Until quite recently, controversial subjects were rigidly excluded, but the B.B.C. has at length decided that the element of controversy may enter into the " talks " and plays, providing, of course, that it is kept within proper limits and that nothing is said which might cause eager resentment. But perhaps it would be advisable for the inexperienced young dramatist to avoid controversial matters and to stick to plots and subjects that do not occasion argument or contradiction. When he has won his spurs and gained a good deal of knowledge, then perhaps he should try his hand at some intriguing and controversial plot.

The remarks written in a previous chapter concerning the variety " sketch " apply to the radio play in so far as the *immediate rousing* of interest is concerned. There must be no preliminary " frills " of dialogue. The thing must start at the word " Go," and must run till the finish without a single " drop-down." Moreover, the interest must be cumulative. The play must start at a high level, and that level must not only be maintained but must be heightened ! This point should be carefully noted by the dramatist, for it is perhaps one of the most vital of all the points in connection with radio drama writing.

The radio dramatist possesses an advantage over the theatre playwright in that he commands a universal background for his plays. He can

## Radio Drama

place his characters in a London slum, a Palace of the Cæsars, or in a corner of the planet Mars, if his imagination rove in stellar regions. He is his own scene-painter. All times, all places, are accessible to him. He can imagine the weirdest—the most impossible—place, and there is none to forbid him.

It has already been hinted that radio drama is not at the present time a very remunerative affair. But one imagines that broadcasting will develop more and more. The time may not be far distant when this class of play will secure a far higher reward than obtains to-day. Moreover, the work is enthrallingly interesting. It gives a writer a splendid scope. It brings his name into prominence. In one evening, his work is heard by more people than would fill a theatre for the space of a couple of years !

## CHAPTER XIV

### CHARACTER-NAMING AND METHODS OF WORK

THIS is only a brief chapter, but the matter involved should be carefully noted by the new writer.

The naming of characters forms a very essential section of the playwright's work. First of all, he has to beware of the law of libel ; secondly, he has to introduce names which are distinctive and characteristic without being eccentric or allegorical.

First about the libel question. A Bill is shortly to be presented to Parliament to amend the law in this direction. At present there is nothing to prevent a foolish or profit-seeking person whose name happens to be attached to a disagreeable or evil character in a play, from bringing an action against the author to recover damages for defamation of character. Indeed, so great is the peril (in theory if not in practice) that many magazines insert a paragraph stating that every character presented in their pages is an imaginary personage. It may be added, however, that this statement does *not* protect the proprietors in the event of any person choosing to take action.

The question now arises—how should the

## Character-Naming and Methods of Work

dramatist (in the absence of Parliamentary protection) guard against this danger.

By a very simple method! Let him invent his *own* names. In this way, he will not only secure good and characteristic labels for his characters, but he will be safe (or comparatively safe) from the absurd attacks of idiotic or unscrupulous persons.

The author can evolve names from his imagination or he may adopt the following simple plan—a plan used by Charles Dickens with huge, delightful results.

Take any two common names, clip them, readapt them, or combine them. For instance, let us select the names of “Wilson” and “Hutchinson.” By excising the “W” in “Wilson,” and adding instead a “G” or a “J,” we get “Gilson” and “Jilson,” neither of which names is likely to be found in the Directory. Or we split up the two names and combine sections; thus getting “Hutchwill” or “Wilsutch.”

It is an interesting diversion this, and, of course, the writer does not claim that the instances quoted are by any means brilliant. They are the first that occur to him, and many names far more distinctive, far more characteristic, and equally libel-proof, might easily be unearthed by the writer who will take a little pains in that direction.

Another good plan is to take a common word and spell it backwards. This process frequently provides an intriguing name, but sometimes the



## How to Succeed as a Playwright

backward arrangement has to be slightly modified. For instance, the little word " May " spelt backwards represents " Yam." Add another " m " and we get " Yamm." Here is a Heaven-born name for a countryman with red face and a stupid manner. Nor is a Mr. Yamm likely to bob up in the King's Bench Court and sue for damages.

At first sight the proposal may seem fantastic and not altogether easy of accomplishment. But experiments will prove that it is a good workable scheme, capable of a variety of adjustments and developments.

Dramatists get their names in many ways. Sir Arthur Pinero finds them on tombstones. Somerset Maugham consults the Telephone Directory. Another dramatist relies on place-names in gazetteers. The method of Oscar Wilde was to use sometimes the names of English seaside towns. Thus we have " John Worthing," " Lady Lancing," and so on.

Names should be characteristic to some extent. Of course, the allegorical christening of the eighteenth century, with its " Lady Sneerwells," its " Benjamin Backbites," and its " Dazzles " and its " Smooths," would be considered to-day a piece of artistic horror. Nevertheless, a certain similitude of name and character may be attempted. Pinero is a master of this kind of character-naming. Think of " Aubrey Tanqueray," a tolerant, sweet-natured English gentleman ; of " Cayley Drummle," a dried-up little cynic (at heart kinder

## Character-Naming and Methods of Work

than the most sentimental sentimentalist); of "Dick Phenyll," the broken-down, semi-drunken, semi-philosophic dweller in the Temple. The characters and the names seem linked inevitably and eternally. Here we have genius at work in the act of christening; and the young dramatist could hardly do better than study the nomenclature in the works of this admirable and delightful author. Pinero at the present moment has been slightly displaced by the feverish modern movement, but he is a master in his own medium, and his plays will probably survive many of the more advanced and more pretentious "masterpieces" of the year 1928.

And now for a word or two concerning methods of work.

Every author must follow his own bent. One man may find it advisable when he has secured an idea for a play to carry it about with him for many days or weeks before he sits down to put his pen to paper. Another will find it more convenient and more helpful to jot down a brief synopsis immediately. A third may make notes from day to day. A fourth will "rough-out" in the beginning an outline of scenes.

Victorien Sardou, a master of the art of construction, was in the habit of writing a very meticulous scenario at the outset. Alexandre Dumas Fils made no scenario, but wrote his play exactly as a man might dash off a letter. Mr. John Galsworthy, we understand, is another

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

writer who does not like the idea of detailed scenarios. Perhaps he imagines that any set form may hamper his imagination as he proceeds. Pinero begins with a definite scheme, but tells us that he does not invariably adhere to it. He finds his characters doing many things of their own volition, and when he yields to their whims he hits upon the truth! Alfred Sutro firmly believes in a good, sound scenario. Mr. Henry Arthur Jones tells us that he frequently writes a dozen or more scenarios before he achieves exactly what he desires. Clyde Fitch, the famous American dramatist, used to say that he found his characters doing all sorts of things that he had never imagined.

These, then, are the methods of the more famous writers of plays. But if the author may offer a suggestion to the beginner, he would say : “ *Get something on paper* as soon as possible. If you fail to do that, you may let your subject elude you altogether. The instant you see something in black-and-white, it serves the purpose of stabilizing your thoughts.” For one cannot help fancying that the young and untried dramatist who drifts for many weeks with nebulous play-fancies in his brain may end by writing nothing at all!

## CHAPTER XV

### SUBJECTS TO BE AVOIDED AND THE PLAYWRIGHT'S IDEALS

CERTAIN subjects should be rigidly avoided by the dramatist who has still to win a name—who cannot afford to introduce topics which may prejudice the acceptance of his work. Whilst authors who have achieved considerable fame may have a certain license in this direction, the beginner must “come to heel.” He can do good and conscientious work within limits quite as well as he can do it outside those limits.

Avoid political topics as the bases of plays. There is no rule against such topics, but audiences usually are not interested. The writer can only recall two political plays that achieved success, viz., “Pilkerton’s Peerage,” by Anthony Hope, and “A Grain of Mustard Seed,” by R. M. Harwood. Both these plays were exceptionally brilliant, and probably succeeded in spite of, and not because of, their political bases.

Avoid, likewise, plays dealing with life behind the scenes of a theatre. Although the public seem vastly interested in the doings of theatrical folk, audiences rarely appear to enjoy plays within

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

plays. There are, of course, notable exceptions. "Trelawney of the Wells" is one. "The Chorus Lady," an American comedy, is another. But even in these plays the theatre was only a background; one saw little of the actual existence behind the scenes.

The morbid plot should be avoided; that is to say, a story should never be written round a surgical operation or a pathological case. Only a few years ago an excellent drama was produced, holding as its chief episode a major operation. Everything centred on this matter. The play ran for a few weeks only, and there is small doubt that it was the morbidness of the central theme that kept away the audiences from the theatre. On the other hand, a play like "Dracula," horrible, gloomy, and terrifying, may attract, because there the element of mystery and sensation outweighs the morbid tendency. But one imagines that "Dracula" was a success of chance rather than of calculation. It happened to come to London at a moment when crime-plays were arousing enormous interest. It is quite a clever piece of work in its way, but the morbidness of the subject might have prejudiced it heavily but for the extraordinary excitement of the story.

Plots dealing with religious problems should be avoided as a rule, because offence may be given to many people by the introduction of certain topics. But the religious element may enter with great success into a play if controversial matters

## Subjects To Be Avoided

are avoided and the chief interest is devoted to one or more of the characters being involved in some religious struggle. For instance, in "The Christian" we have a young idealist trying to live the Christlike existence in modern London. In "The Fool," an American play which enjoyed a huge success, a similar theme was treated. "The Sign of the Cross," a somewhat tawdry melodrama, brought a fortune to its author. But in none of these plays was there a single line that might have caused annoyance to Jew, Gentile, Protestant, Roman Catholic, or Mohammedan. To sum up this paragraph, we may suggest that if a young dramatist sits down to write a play wherein the religious element enters, he should devote himself to individual cases and not to sectarian or inter-creed differences.

The pornographic plot should be rigidly avoided. Even if it pass the Censor (and that gentleman sometimes shows a very extraordinary wide-mindedness on occasions), the chances are that it will not secure popular acceptance. As a nation, the British people are clean-minded. The national vice is alcohol—not sexual excess. A play with a pornographic basis may attract small sniggering audiences, and depraved schoolboys, but it will not run for a year nor even for three months. Just as in the journalistic area, the pornographic journal has never proved a genuine success, so in the theatre. One might almost lay it down as an axiom that the plays that have run

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

for years have been plays to which the Archbishop of Canterbury himself could not have objected! "Chu Chin Chow," "The Farmer's Wife," "Marigold," "Charley's Aunt," "The Private Secretary"—every one of these record-breakers is decent and self-respecting from start to finish!

Propaganda plots should also be avoided. Whilst one may deplore the tendency of the public to look with dislike on anything that is educational and didactic, we have, unfortunately, to reckon with that tendency. It is true that once in a way a plot that sets out to voice some grievance or some public scandal may attract audiences. An excellent example is "The Outsider," a play that dealt with the hardship of the unqualified osteopath. But dramas of the kind, even when well-conceived and well-written, rarely prove successful from the box-office viewpoint, although they may win academic praise. About six years ago, a most admirable and forcible play, called "The Right To Strike," was produced at a London theatre. The object of the author was to show that if the striking habit extended to all classes, chaos would ensue. The critics sang pæans of praise concerning this piece, but its run was brief. The audience did *not* want to be taught a lesson. It did not want propaganda, whether pro-Labour or pro-Capital!

These, then, are the principal topics that the dramatist should avoid unless, of course, he be

## Subjects To Be Avoided

one of those much-to-be admired persons who write to please themselves and not their audiences. Let us now consider for a moment the ideals of the playwright.

His chief ideal should be to obey the Shakespearian ethic and hold the mirror up to nature. But let him take care that it is not a distorting mirror. Let him "see life steadily and see it whole." Let him remember too that, no matter how uncompromising a realist he may desire to be, complete realism can *never* be secured in the theatre. The mere presentation in a couple of hours of events which in life might be spread over days, weeks, months, or years, must of necessity strike a death blow at stark reality. And since that end cannot be entirely achieved, why should he not impart to his theme a little of the colour of imagination and the glamour of romance?

Pinero, Henry Arthur Jones, Haddon Chambers, Hubert Henry Davies, Oscar Wilde, and the majority of the dramatists of the Victorian era have been blamed by certain critics for their "theatrical" tendency. It has been said of them that there was a certain smoothness, a certain gloss, a certain *tendresse* (the writer uses the French word because "tenderness" does not mean exactly the same thing), that prejudiced their work as a representation of life. We wonder! It must be admitted, however, even by those critics, that one left the theatre feeling



## How to Succeed as a Playwright

elated, charmed, lifted for an hour at least into a region where the sordid things of life seemed a million miles distant. It is true, of course, that there was a certain artificiality about the business, but the same criticism might easily be applied to many modern plays that contain *all* the artificiality and *none* of the glamour. If the writer were asked what is missing in the modern play he would say at once, "Glamour!" Sir James Barrie is, perhaps, the only English dramatist who has retained the trick of it.

Let the young dramatist, then, conceive a high ideal in regard to truth and realism, but let him remember that, after all, the theatre is the theatre. It is not a class-room; it is not a lecture-hall. The audience goes primarily to be entertained, to be lifted out of itself. Stark realism, bitter truth, will rarely achieve these ends. One may tell the truth, but one may tell it with a smile and a wave of the hand: one need not grind it out with a snarl and a kick!

The point which eludes many so-called realists is that pleasant, attractive people may be just as real as morose egotists and diseased imbeciles. P. G. Wodehouse is quite as realistic in his own way as Strindberg in his way. Each exaggerates a little. Unfortunately, the word "realism" has always been more or less connected with the gloomy side of life. Sane realism will deal with sunlight as readily as it will deal with mud.

## Subjects To Be Avoided

And now for a word about the "money-making" ideal as it concerns the dramatist and indeed every creative artiste :

The main objective of every writer is no doubt (and quite properly) the earning of money. Dr. Johnson said with that air of finality that was so entirely Johnsonian that the man who wrote for nothing usually deserved it. But, whilst the question of reward in money may naturally weigh with the embryo dramatist, let him in the hour of work itself abandon all thoughts of possible reward.

For this reason : If the success and bank-balance notions are at the back of his brain whilst he sits at his desk, he will be thinking of expediency rather than of honest effort. He will be hidebound by a dozen conventions which he fancies are the conventions within which other dramatists have won fame and money. He will try, perhaps, to imitate their methods, their tricks, their very eccentricities. He will become a slave, a mere copyist. In his non-working hours, by all means let him think about the financial side of his art, but when the pen is in his hand he must forget that money exists. He must be himself for his own sake and for the sake of his work.

This handbook is not a book of ethics, and for that reason one will not pursue this matter to any length. But there is a practical side to the advice, entirely apart from the ethical side. For the man who sits down to write with the mere notion of money in his brain, who keeps his

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

thoughts fixed throughout the process on the results rather than on the actual effort of the moment, is travelling the very road that will cause his journey to be a futile thing, bare of artistic triumph and bare, also, of a money reward!

“Follow the Gleam!” The Gordon Selfridges, the Vanderbilts, the Rockefellers of the world will tell you that, when they were building up their fortunes, they were thinking of the struggle and the joy of effort and not of the final achievement of millions. Exactly the same truth applies to the creative artiste. A high ideal will always pay better than a purely materialistic end. The writer, in setting down these final paragraphs, may be accused of confusing his issues: it may be said that he has advised his readers to forget the money side of writing in order that ultimately more money may come. Well, he accepts the charge, and would point out that we have it on the greatest of all Authorities that a man must lose his life if he wish eternally to keep it!

## CHAPTER XVI

### HOW TO MARKET A PLAY

YOUNG writers should not be discouraged by the absurdly pessimistic remarks which they sometimes read in the Press regarding the difficulties of placing a play on the market. In the majority of cases the difficulties arise from internal rather than from external causes. The plays offered are worthless or are unsuitable or are too expensive for production. A good play which is suitable to the management to which it is offered stands as good a chance of acceptance as a story of the same merit submitted to a monthly magazine.

Theatrical managements are ready to go down on their knees and burn incense at the feet of the author who will bring them a play that meets their requirements. Their trouble is that they cannot find this highly-desirable person. That is why they fall back on the established dramatist, even when the latter can only offer their second-best work.

An unknown author has, perhaps, a better chance than an established writer, because the former will be ready to accept an immensely lower

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

remuneration. A dramatist of the first rank sometimes requires £1,000 paid down to him on completion of the first act. His requirements in the shape of royalties are also on an expansive scale. If, therefore, the untried young author imagine that there is a "cabal" or "ring" endeavouring to keep him out of the theatrical market, he had better shake himself free of that delusion.

There are several good methods of marketing a play. We will describe them categorically and in some detail.

1. Write a play with a certain outstanding actor or actress in your mind. Give the artiste a tremendous opportunity. Work into the part drama, comedy, pathos, humour, sarcasm—indeed every kind of emotion that will enable the player to display a complete range of talent. Having done this, send your play to that artiste, with a very brief synopsis of the story. Suggest in your letter that the chief part has been written with a view to the artiste in question. Not for a moment is it to be imagined that a poor play will be accepted on these grounds, but, given a fairly strong and suitable work, the fact that it affords a big opportunity for an important artiste will undoubtedly aid its acceptance.

2. Submit your work to one of the Play-producing Societies that have, of late years, done excellent artistic service in bringing to light the productions of unknown men and women. (An abridged list of these organizations will be found

## How To Market a Play

in the Appendix.) These Societies usually present their plays on Sunday evenings, in order that actors and actresses of position who are engaged throughout the week may take part in them. The Press invariably devotes considerable space to these shows if they contain merit, and a young author is afforded every opportunity of seeing his work produced suitably and with distinction.

3. Offer the play to a Repertory Company. These Companies are now established in various parts of the country. There are several in London. (See Appendix.) There is a certain advantage over the Play-producing Society here, because the pieces may run for a week, a fortnight, or even for three weeks, whereas in the case of the Sunday Societies only one evening is devoted to the performance.

4. Submit your play direct to any management to which it may appear suitable. Write a short covering letter, but do not sing your own praises nor point out irrelevant facts.

5. Employ an agent to market your play. This plan, however, is perhaps not to be specially recommended in the case of an unknown author, because agents rarely display much energy when they are dealing with persons whose work may never bring them a shilling in the way of commission.

6. If you can by some means make the acquaintance of an important actor or actress and can get the player to show an interest in your

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

work, then it is sometimes a good plan to avail yourself of the friendship to get your play shown to some good management. But this method is not by any means an ideal one, and sometimes entails a great deal of delay and a mass of disappointment.

These, then, are the principal methods of marketing a play. There are other methods, but they are long-winded and not to be recommended to the beginner.

A full-length play should *never* be sold outright. In a former chapter we pointed out that it is sometimes advisable to pursue this course with a "sketch" or a "curtain-raiser," but the man who parts with a full-length work for a lump sum is doing what may prove in the result a very foolish thing. His best plan is to stipulate for a small royalty on the gross receipts. The beginner sometimes has to be satisfied with five per cent. But, assuming that his play is successful, this is by no means a bad start. For, imagine that his play runs only six months to an average gross weekly "takings" of £1,000 (by no means an inordinate figure), he will secure approximately £1,500. He will also receive royalties from the touring Companies. In addition, he may sell his play to a Film organization. Later, when he has made something of a name, he may secure ten per cent. or even fifteen per cent. on gross receipts. His work will also be available for amateur performances, but in these cases a set fee is paid for

## How To Market a Play

each representation. The fee varies from two guineas to five guineas or more.

The successful playwright should invariably employ a good agent to market his work. Nowadays there are so many ramifications in connection with the theatrical world that an inexperienced author whose business acumen is not strong might easily find himself in a hopeless muddle if he attempted to deal with the business side and commercial side of the work. But let him be careful concerning his choice of an agent. Only a few firms can be regarded as reliable and energetic. Above all, let him avoid the agent who charges preliminary fees. These gentlemen sometimes do little more than thrust an MS. into an envelope and post it to the first management that occurs to them. Bear in mind also that first-class agents *never* charge preliminary fees and *never* advertise!

A good agent will do all sorts of things which might not occur to the author. Not only will he secure for him good, sound agreements, but he will perhaps arrange for the work to be filmed, to be translated into foreign languages, to be marketed in the United States and the British Colonies. Nor are his charges excessive, ranging from ten to fifteen per cent. The usual charge is on the lower basis. In some cases, perhaps, only five per cent. might be charged by a conscientious agent, if he saw vast possibilities in an author's work.



## How to Succeed as a Playwright

And now for a few rather obvious hints concerning the presentation of an MS. :

1. Invariably retain a copy of the work, preferably two copies.

2. Have the MS. clearly typed and post it flat, or folded, but *never rolled*.

3. Put your full name and address on the body of the MS. and not on a slip of paper accompanying it.

4. Enclose large stamped envelope for return and enclose additional stamps for registration.

5. *Never* send out a faded or dirty MS. The money spent in having it re-typed will be more than justified. The mere fact that it has passed through many hands might prejudice a management against it, though this statement need not be accepted as final and certain.

6. State on cover approximate time of performance and number of words. The average three-act play usually runs to 17,000 or 18,000.

7. If the plot is sufficiently intriguing, write a very short synopsis. If, however, the attraction of the play depend rather upon treatment and upon characterization, then omit the synopsis.

There is no necessity in this chapter to enter into isolated cases where an author wishes to produce his play for copyright purposes and engages a theatre or licensed hall for that purpose, nor need we deal with the question of the publication in book-form of plays. The former matter will not concern the average young dramatist who

## How To Market a Play

will desire to see his first effort produced by a responsible management and not at his own expense. The second matter is rather for the established dramatist than for the beginner. But information on these subjects will be found in several volumes to be obtained at any theatrical booksellers.

One word more. If a young dramatist happen to have influential City friends, he may sometimes prevail on one of them to finance his play. That is to say, the Croesus would guarantee a good West End management against loss, or would undertake the entire outlay, recouping himself with a share of the proceeds. A play is as speculative a matter as a gold-mine, and almost as remunerative as a gold-mine when it happens to achieve a great and extended success. But this plan is not recommended as a general method. It is far, far better that the young author should stand on his own literary feet !

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE L.S.D. OF PLAY-WRITING—AND A LAST LOOK ROUND

A SUCCESSFUL play is probably far, far more remunerative than an equally successful novel. We are assuming, of course, that the novel is never converted into a play or a film, and that the play likewise undergoes no development of its original form. Let us present a few figures :

We will consider a novel and a play which, whilst not record-makers, such as "If Winter Comes," or "Charley's Aunt," are, nevertheless, said to be outstanding successes. The novel, we will assume, sells 100,000 copies. In the publishing region, this is regarded as a very exceptional sale. The play, we will assume, runs for nine months in Town and has a continuous life for four or five years in the Provinces.

Now the novel, published at 7s. 6d., yields, say, ten per cent. to the author. On 100,000 copies he therefore receives, after a considerable delay (for publishers are never in an indecent hurry), the sum of £3,750.

On the other hand, the play filling the house nightly and at two matinées per week, produces an average of (let us say) £200 per performance.

## The L.S.D. of Play-Writing

This is by no means a very high estimate, for the capacity of some theatres is £300 or even £350 per night. The gross weekly amount would be £1,600. On the usual ten per cent. basis, the author would receive £160 per week.

Now multiply this figure by thirty-six weeks, and you get £5,760. Estimate the touring profits at a mere £600 per annum (a very low estimate when one remembers that a successful play is often performed by two or even three Companies simultaneously), and you get a bulk sum for town and country of £6,360. But as the play will probably continue touring for three or four years at least, one might assume a further amount of £1,500 to £2,000. The successful author has thus made more than £8,000, and let it be remembered we are referring to a piece which, whilst a conspicuous success, is not a "money-maker" of the highest order.

It will be obvious from the above figures (which are, of course, only approximate) that the successful dramatist has made more than double the amount secured by the equally successful novelist. Moreover, the work has probably not occupied the same length of time. For, whereas the average novel runs to 90,000 or 100,000 words, the average play runs only (as we have pointed out in the last chapter) to about 17,000 or 18,000 words.

Very extensive fortunes have been made by successful playwrights. The royalties earned by

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

“Charley’s Aunt” since its first production over thirty years ago would probably run into more than £500,000. The play still has many years of life and of profit-earning remaining to its excellent humours. At its first performance it failed to attract, and indeed ran for several weeks without giving any evidence of the amazing possibilities that it held within its three delightful acts. Suddenly the tide turned. The piece came to London, ran for several years without a break, and has since been played not only in every corner of the world where English is spoken, including many islands in the Pacific, but it has, moreover, been translated into French, German, Spanish, and even Chinese!

“Chu Chin Chow,” a musical piece written by Mr. Oscar Asche to while away a wet week when he was unable to play golf, ran for more than four years and probably earned over a million pounds in gross receipts, if the Provincial and Colonial representations are included in the estimate. “The Farmer’s Wife,” a delightful comedy by Eden Phillpotts, ran without a break for about the same period and probably earned quite as much money as the musical piece. It is still being played in various places, and may continue to prove an absolute gold-mine for many years to come. In fact, the possibilities of a really successful play, a play that is independent of fashion and of period, are practically unlimited.

Even a play that does not achieve an enormous

## The L.S.D. of Play-Writing

run in Town may continue to amble on its way throughout the Provinces and the Colonies, and bring in a steady and highly lucrative income to its author.

It will be obvious, therefore, that the successful or partially successful dramatist will have no cause to look upon his work as unremunerative, and whilst the mere heaping up of money should never be the sole object of a man who takes his work seriously, it may easily act as a very keen incentive.

Let the young author, therefore, who has any kind of *flair* for dramatic work, concentrate all his thoughts and all his time on this medium of expression. For not only will it provide him in the event of success with a most excellent income : it will furnish his days and weeks with one of the most fascinating species of work conceivable by the brain of man.

And now, as this little book nears its end, let us take a last look round and consider several things that have thus far not been viewed.

Let no author grow self-satisfied ; let him beware of what some wit called “ fatty degeneration of the brain.” If he make a great success with a certain play, let him endeavour when he sits down to write its successor, to “ go one better.” If, dazzled by his success, by the praise of critics, by the applause of the audiences, he begins to feel that he may do as he choose with

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

his public, if, to use a very homely phrase, he "runs past himself," then he is immediately on the downward grade and aiming for failure.

Criticize yourselves, you young dramatists ! Go and sit in the pit and watch your play. Try and see how much better you might have made it. Listen, also, to the comments of your neighbours ! It is probable that you will hear some highly intriguing comments. The young woman sitting next to you may confide to her friend that she is certain the heroine would never have acted as she is acting, would never have done this or that. Or the stout military personage beside you, when you watch your play from the stalls, may clear his throat aggressively and grumble in a *sotto voce* whisper that "No soldier on earth would dream of speaking to his superior officer in that way." And so on. . . . Note the comments on your shirtcuff if you cannot rely on your memory, and when you have an opportunity rewrite them in a book devoted to the purpose. Think a lot about these casual and democratic criticisms ; ask yourself whether they are justified. You will find this process enormously useful, more useful, perhaps, than the carefully-considered academic remarks of the professional critics.

Remember, moreover, when you are in the act of planning your play at the outset that it should appeal not to any one class of Society but to every class. That is where a play is, of course, far, far more exigent in its requirements than a

## The L.S.D. of Play-Writing

novel. A story by Joseph Conrad will be bought by one section of readers ; a story by Jack London or Zane Grey by another. But a play, if it is to be a prolonged success, must make a strong appeal to the millionaire in the stalls and the little milliner in the gallery. It is true, no doubt, that you can run a play for a few weeks by appealing merely to a certain class of playgoer, but after that time its possibilities will wane. It is this exacting requirement that above all things tends to make the successful dramatist a very rare personage.

After your first play has been produced, you will naturally turn with excitement to the Press criticisms. Do not allow yourself to be discouraged if these are not as glowing, as kindly, as you could wish. Remember that many plays which have been coldly received by the critics have ultimately achieved more or less success. But, above all things, do not jump to the absurd conclusion that the Pressmen have formed a prejudice against you because you happen to be a new playwright. Critics become pessimistic by being compelled to sit out a dreary succession of trashy plays. So far from wishing to crush a new author, they are beside themselves with joy when the real gold at last shines before their tired eyes.

Years ago Clement Scott, one of the most severe of critics when he had reason to be severe, rushed from a certain theatre to sit up for two



## How to Succeed as a Playwright

hours on a cold night whilst he wrote a column-and-a-half about a new and almost unknown actor. So enraptured was Scott with his discovery that he would not eat or drink till he had written the last line. That actor was Henry Irving. It was Scott who helped to bring him into fame.

To-day there are many critics anxious and willing to do this service for the young dramatist if his work justify their praises. And, lest these truths seem too obvious for setting down here, let the writer add that he has learned by personal intercourse that too many beginners are inclined to fancy that there is a prejudice against the new-comer to the dramatic field. As a matter of fact, if there be any prejudice in existence, it is a prejudice in favour of the new man who may have a wonderful talent to offer to his generation.

If your first play unhappily prove a failure, do not waste your time in self-reproach. Get busy and try again. If you have in your bones the stuff whereof the dramatist is made, you will win through as surely as the day follows the night. You cannot help it!

Let your failure be your teacher! His fees are high, but he rarely turns out a bad scholar. Examine your play once more. Get outside yourself! Try and judge the work as if it were the work of somebody else, and that somebody a man of whom you think very little. Immediately, you will begin to see weaknesses, defects, blemishes, that escaped you in your earlier days. Your next

## The L.S.D. of Play-Writing

play will be all the better for that piece of self-discipline.

And now for a final word concerning the joys of the life of the dramatist. To few men, perhaps, are there given more varied, more vivid, experiences.

He secures first of all a competence, and sometimes more than a competence, becoming a very rich man. He is his own master within limits. He can arrange his hours of work to suit himself. Moreover, he is largely independent of place and country. He can live where he choose, and can write his play equally well in London, Paris, Buda Pesth, or the Fiji Islands. Even when the play is in course of rehearsal, he need not leave his retreat unless he wish. In fact, the managements are frequently quite glad when the author keeps his distance.

He has the joy, not given to the writer of books, of watching and hearing the effect upon his audiences of the work of his pen. The novelist rarely sees any persons poring over his fictions, and even the most enthusiastic friends can only gush for a few minutes. But the dramatist, lucky fellow, can sit quietly in his box or in a corner of the pit, and there listen to the most exquisite music that the world can offer him : the music of laughter, of applause, as these things greet the shadow-creatures of his brain.

But, of a certainty, his supreme joy, if he be a true artist, will be the joy of creation, of seeing

## How to Succeed as a Playwright

men and women born and growing-up beneath his pen. For a little time, he will sit at his desk as a god, moving his Pawns, his Kings, his Queens, across the chessboard of his imagination, and whether the work succeed or fail, he will at least have had his hour.

“*Non cuivis homini contingit adire Corinthum,*” says Horace. “Not to every man is it given to reach Corinth!” But to every man it is given to do the best that is in him, to be faithful to the best he knows. The man who achieves that end will have no fault to find with life when the final curtain falls!

THE END

## APPENDIX

### LIST OF PLAY-PRODUCING SOCIETIES (Abridged)

- Incorporated Stage Society, 36, Southampton Street, W.C.2.  
The Phoenix Society, 36, Southampton Street, W.C.2.  
The Pioneer Players, 31, Bedford Street, W.C.2.  
The Repertory Players, 50, Whitcomb Street, W.C.2.  
The Fellowship of Players, 32, Gerrard Street, W.C.1.  
The Play Actors' Society, 42, Cranbourne Street, W.C.2.  
The Interlude Players, The Three Arts Club, N.W.1.  
The "Playroom Six," 6, New Compton Street, W.C.2.

### LIST OF REPERTORY COMPANIES (Abridged)

- The Everyman Theatre, Hampstead, N.W.  
The "Q" Theatre, Kew.  
The "Cave of Harmony," St. Giles's, W.C.1.  
The "Old Vic" Shakespeare Company, Waterloo Road, S.E.1.  
The Playhouse, Liverpool.  
The Repertory Theatre, Birmingham.  
The Repertory Theatre, Bristol.  
The Repertory Theatre, Nottingham.  
The "Little Vic," Brighton.  
Miss Lena Ashwell's Repertory Company, Century Theatre, Bayswater, W.

### PRINCIPAL THEATRICAL CLUBS

- Garrick Club.  
Eccentric Club.  
Savage Club.

## Appendix

Green Room Club.  
O.P. Club.  
The Actors' Club.  
Yorick Club.

### PRINCIPAL LITERARY CLUBS

Authors'.  
P.E.N.  
"Sesame."  
"Three Arts."  
"Writers'."

### INSTITUTIONS AND BENEVOLENT SOCIETIES (Abridged)

The Society of Authors, Playwrights and Composers,  
11, Gower Street, W.C.1.  
The Royal Literary Fund, Stationers' Hall, E.C.4.  
The Royal General Theatrical Fund, 13, Henrietta  
Street, W.C.2.

### THEATRES

A complete list of the Principal Theatres in London, the provinces, and the Colonies, etc., will be found in any Stage Annual, together with other data useful to the Playwright.

### PRESS-CUTTINGS

Dramatists who have produced plays frequently desire to read Press-criticisms. For a small fee these can be secured from any reputable Press-Cutting Agency. A list of the addresses may be found in the Post Office Directory or any Literary Press Guide. The usual rates charged are as follows :—

40 cuttings, 10s. 6d.; 100 cuttings, £1 1s. od.

and so on, with a slight sliding-scale reduction as the number of cuttings is increased. In the majority of cases, no extra charge is made for postage.











